

**“MUDDILY HUMAN”: ANTIMODERNISM IN THE
NOVELS OF ROBERT KROETSCH**

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Abstract

For many years the novels of Robert Kroetsch have been canonized as paradigmatic Canadian postmodern and postcolonial texts. This thesis argues that Kroetsch's texts are antimodernist works which reveal his reaction against modernity. I explore each of Kroetsch's novels in chronological order, from the unpublished text *When Sick for Home* to his most recent novel *The Man from the Creeks*, arguing that Kroetsch's novels should be viewed as texts that demonstrate his antipathy towards modernity, which is manifested in Kroetsch's nostalgic idealization of the imagined organic wholeness of a world existing prior to modernization. Throughout this thesis I discuss the parallels between the writings of Robert Kroetsch and Marshall McLuhan, emphasizing the antimodernism that underpins their works. I argue that their antimodernism signals their participation in a tradition of the critique of modernity. By foregrounding the idea of the modernist critique of modernity, which comprises an important element of artistic modernism, I question the privileging of the qualifier "post-" in constructions of the Canadian postmodern canon. In foregrounding the antimodernism evident throughout Robert Kroetsch's fiction, I interrogate the construction of Canadian postmodernism in his own works and those of other Canadian critics including Linda Hutcheon. Through my analysis of the recurring motifs of the wilderness and the rural environment in Kroetsch's work, I locate his fiction within Western antimodernist tradition, interrogating cultural nationalist constructions of Canadian postmodernism as an autochthonous phenomenon.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a poet, novelist and critic, Robert Kroetsch has for many years been associated with Canadian postmodernism and postcolonialism. Novels such as *The Studhorse Man*, *Gone Indian* and *Badlands* have become paradigmatic texts in the canon of Canadian postmodernism,¹ and indeed, following the rise of interest in Canada as a postcolonial nation, these novels have been read by many critics as postcolonial texts.²

Readings of Kroetsch as a “postmodern” and “postcolonial” writer emphasize the idea of “post” as temporal progress, ignoring the way that Kroetsch’s novels demonstrate his distaste for the contemporary world, and his desire to retrieve a pre-

¹ Among the critical essays and books exploring Kroetsch’s postmodernism are (listed chronologically) Louis MacKendrick’s “Robert Kroetsch and the Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion” (1978), Stanley Fogel’s “‘I See England, I See France...’: Robert Kroetsch’s *Alibi*” (1984), Karen Germundson’s “Reentering the Wasteland: Robert Kroetsch’s Postmodern Fiction” and Walter Pache’s “‘The Fiction Makes Us Real’: Aspects of Postmodernism in Canada” (1985), Ian Adam’s “The Home Triptych Via Modernism and Post-Modernism: Naipaul and Kroetsch” (1987), Robert R. Wilson’s “The Discourse of Museums: Exhibiting Postmodernism,” and the concluding chapter of Linda Hutcheon’s *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988), Neil Bessner’s “Beyond *Two Solitudes*, After *Survival*: Postmodern Fiction in Canada” and Martin Kuester’s “Kroetsch’s Fragments: Approaching the Narrative Structure of his Novels” (1992), Frank Davey’s “American Alibis: a Search for Robert Kroetsch’s Postmodernism” (1996), W.F. Garrett-Petts and Donald Lawrence’s “Thawing the Frozen Image/Word: Vernacular Postmodern Aesthetics,” and Marie Vauthier’s *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction* (1998), Simona Bertacco’s *Out of Place: the Writings of Robert Kroetsch* (2002), and Russell M. Brown’s “Robert Kroetsch, Marshall McLuhan, and Canada’s Prairie Postmodernism: the Aberhart Effect” (2005).

² Critical works discussing Kroetsch’s writings as postcolonial texts include (listed chronologically) Stephen Slemon’s “Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse” (1988), Aritha Van Herk. “Crowb(e)ars and Kangaroos of the Future: the Post-Colonial Ga(s)p” (1990), Peter W. Sinnema’s “Quest(ion)ing *Gone Indian*’s Dialectic: Subversive Repetition and the Possibility of a ‘Centred’ Indigene” (1990), Dorothy Seaton’s “The Post-Colonial as Deconstruction: Land and Language in Kroetsch’s *Badlands*” (1991), Sylvia Söderlind. *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, (1991), Lee Spinks’s “Kroetsch’s Narcissus: Alienation and Identity in *But We Are Exiles*” (1993), Gunilla Florby’s *The Margin Speaks: a Study of Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch from a Post-Colonial Point of View* (1997), and Luca Biagiotti’s “Bees, Bodies, and Magical Miscegenations: Robert Kroetsch’s *What the Crow Said*.” (1999). In contrast, David Williams compares what he sees as Kroetsch’s postmodernism with Rohinton Mistry’s postcolonialism in “Cyberwriting and the Borders of Identity: ‘What’s in a Name’ in Kroetsch’s *The Puppeteer* and Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey*” (1996). Several of Kroetsch’s essays have also been republished in anthologies of postcolonial criticism: “Unhiding the Hidden” has been anthologised in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995), and “Disunity as Unity” has been reprinted in Cynthia Sugars’s *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism* (2004).

modern existence based upon life on the soil and/or in the wilderness: a desire for the elimination of what he sees as the corrupting influence of modernity. This thesis explores each of Kroetsch's novels, from the early, unpublished text *When Sick for Home* to his most recent novel, *The Man from the Creeks*. My belief is that Kroetsch's novels should be viewed as texts that reveal the author's reaction against modernity, expressing his nostalgic longing for the organic wholeness of a world existing prior to modernization. In this introduction I will explore the concepts of modernity and antimodernism, briefly touching on debates about modernism and postmodernism which were current at a crucial stage in Kroetsch's career. Secondly, I will relate Kroetsch's antimodernism to the concept of postcolonialism. Finally, I will discuss the little-studied short story "That Yellow Prairie Sky," written by Kroetsch in the 1950s and therefore predating the novels explored in the main body of the thesis.

Looking back over Kroetsch's fiction, it is clear that his novels were written over the course of a period when issues about the boundaries of the terms modernism and postmodernism were under debate. Kroetsch embroils himself in these debates through his own criticism. For example, in his introduction to the 1974 "Canadian Issue" of the journal *boundary 2*, Kroetsch states that "Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern. Morley Callaghan³ went to Paris and met the Modern writers; he, for Canada experienced the real and symbolic encounter; he, heroically and successfully, resisted. The country that invented Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye did so by not ever being Modern" (1).⁴ The trouble with this

³ Morley Callaghan (1903-1990) was a Canadian novelist, short story writer and broadcaster.

⁴ In later works Kroetsch indicates that Frye is a modernist in his "trying to assert the oneness, the unity of all narrative" ("Disunity as Unity" 24). Russell M. Brown reports that Kroetsch contrasts McLuhan and Frye in an unpublished 1970 lecture. According to Brown's account, Kroetsch argues that Frye is "a late spokesman for Modernism, reconstructing the Modernist project of containing and synthesizing through myth, while McLuhan provides an alternative direction – one that leads into what, from our current vantage point, looks like a deconstructive postmodernism, in which coherence gives way to multiplicity, and synthesis and meaning become elusive" ("Robert Kroetsch, Marshall McLuhan, and Canada's Prairie Postmodernism", 125). It is significant that when he is praising Frye he insists that he

sweeping statement is that Canada did have “modernists,” including poets such as Earle Birney and F.R. Scott, novelists such as the prairie realists Martha Ostenso and F.P. Grove (with whom Kroetsch indicates his familiarity in several of the essays collected in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*),⁵ and perhaps most obviously in the field of visual art, painters such as the Group of Seven and Emily Carr. Kroetsch’s refusal to countenance the existence of Canadian modernism is manifested in statements such as this from *Labyrinths of Voice*, his interview with Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson: “Modernism was so ambiguous for Canadian literature – I still don’t really think there was a modernist phase [...] We have yet to name the beautiful and violent thing (the Group of Seven, Emily Carr) that was happening to us while American artists were being ‘Modern’” (152). The deferral of naming this “beautiful and violent thing” (which, in his use of “We,” he attributes to Canadians as a whole) is a refusal to accept that Carr and the Group of Seven can be “named” as modernists: modernists who admittedly participate in what might be described as an antimodern modernism, but modernists nonetheless. Antimodernism comprises a significant strand of artistic modernism, exemplified, for example in the contrast between the primitivist and futurist tendencies in early twentieth century art.⁶ As Linda Jessup’s comments on the Group’s reaction against modernity indicate, their polemical response to modern culture was by no means isolated:

the Group were antimodernists; their suspicion of so-called progress was one of a number of responses that tied them to a more general fear in Western society from the end of the nineteenth century that the unprecedented social

is a postmodernist, and when he is distancing himself from his forebear he represents him as a modernist.

⁵ Kaye and Thacker discuss the combination of modernism with an anti-technological impulse in the work of Ostenso and Grove in “Gone Back to Alberta” (178).

⁶ For recent comprehensive work of art history which explores antimodernist tendencies within twentieth century art, see Foster et al.

changes wrought by industrial capitalism – among them the shift to routinized work and bureaucratic rationality – were removing the possibility of ‘authentic’ experience” (“Bushwhackers” 132).

It is important to recognize that antimodernism is not a reaction against “modernism” per se, but against modernization and modernity more generally.

Why does Kroetsch insist upon the direct transition from “Victorian” to “Postmodern” in his construction of Canadian literature? The answer can be found through analysis of Kroetsch’s novels, texts spanning a period of over thirty years, from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. As the main chapters of this thesis will explore, throughout Kroetsch’s fiction he manifests a reaction against modernity. By making an argument about the transition from Victorian to Postmodern, Kroetsch attempts to free Canada from being “Modern,” which he sees as a state of being deeply implicated in the operations of modernity. In making this claim, Kroetsch’s remarks fit in with the general pattern of his very reductive response to the idea of “modernism.” Effectively, for Kroetsch, modernist writers are participants in modernity. Modernism is art that celebrates modernity, and is therefore implicated in it. His conflation of modernity and modernism elides the antimodernist critique which has always been a crucial strand of artistic modernism; as Myers points out, “Much Modernism is critical of modernity, albeit complexly related to the latter’s processes” (14). According to Kroetsch’s construction of the modern/postmodern binary, his assertion that Canada has no modernism associates the nation with the privileged second term.

For Kroetsch, “modernists” had a flawed way of looking at the world, in their desire to impose unity on it: “The spirit of high Modernism was to assert the validity of a single cosmology and, with it, closure. Modernists wanted things to be all of a

piece again” (*Labyrinths of Voice* 28). Also in this text, Kroetsch explains why he feels that Canada has managed to escape from the influence of modernism:

First of all, I think that Modernism was a product of a high urban civilization and we just didn't have any. There is a strong Victorian influence that lingers in Canadian writing right on through the 1920's. It was really the discovery of urban civilization that produced Modernism, the sense of European cities as focal, fascinating places. I suppose that Callaghan rather timidly approaches that urban world of Modernism, but he withdraws from it. He is essentially a country boy. Modernism just wasn't available to Canadian writers as it was to Europeans and Americans” (111).

For Kroetsch, modernism is connected with the celebration of “urban civilization,” and is therefore loaded with the negative aspects that are associated with the urban throughout his fiction.⁷ In particular, he associates modernism with Europe: “The Moderns had a strong sense of immediately being involved in history, an incredible sense that Europe was the centre of the world and they were the centre of Europe and they were writing it down” (198). In Kroetsch's construction, modernism is not only always European (or European-influenced American),⁸ but also always urban: by failing to recognize that Canada's population has been predominantly urban since the

⁷ Kroetsch's construction of Canada as predominantly rural is contradicted by census statistics, which indicate that by 1921, the population of Canada was almost exactly divided between the city and the country – 49% urban, 51% rural. Since then, the greater part of the population has always been urban, rising from 54% in 1931 to 80% in 2001 (Statistics Canada. “Population Urban and Rural, by Province and Territory.”

<<http://www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/demo62a.htm>>).

⁸ In maintaining a distinction between the American writers whom he castigates for succumbing to European influence, such as Pound and Elliot, and those whom he praises for eschewing Europe and for taking inspiration from their immediate environment, such as Williams (whose influence is discussed later in this chapter), Kroetsch echoes D.G. Jones's essay “In Search of America,” first published in the 1974 Canadian issue of *boundary 2*, which Kroetsch edited. Jones refers to urban modernity as an “official America [...] whose roots are in Europe” (235), which he sees as existing in marked contrast to the natural America epitomized by Whitman, who “Accept[s] his soil as he accept[s] himself” (233-4).

nineteen-thirties, he adds weight to his assertion that Canada did not participate in the “modernism” that he conceives as an exclusively metropolitan phenomenon.

In recent years, the Eurocentric vision of modernism has been challenged by critics who focus on the “alternative modernities” of places outside the “West” comprising Europe and the United States.⁹ Even Canada’s prairies, the area where most of Kroetsch’s novels are set, have recently been explored as sites of modernity. Rod Bantjes describes prairie farmers as modernists, actively shaping their environment with the use of mechanical equipment. In “Modernism and the Machine Farmer,” Bantjes highlights the existence of “rural modernism, a self-conscious celebration of the conditions of modernity,” prevalent in wheat producing regions of Canada and the United States in the early twentieth century (122).¹⁰ For Kroetsch, Canadian “country boy[s]” like Morley Callaghan “withdraw” from a modernism that he constructs as being exclusively urban, in a view that contrasts markedly with that of Bantjes, who insists upon the recognition of the rural western Canadian landscape as a locus of modernity and modernism.¹¹

⁹ For example, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkor’s edited collection *Alternative Modernities* includes Leo Ou-fan Lee’s reflection on modernism in 1930s Shanghai, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s exploration of the experience of “dwelling in modernity” in Calcutta, and Beatriz Jaguaribe’s discussion of Brazilian modernist architecture. While this collection succeeds in emphasizing the existence of modernities outside Europe and North America, its focus on cities means that the existence of rural modernities is overlooked.

¹⁰ For example, Bantjes interprets the history of Saskatchewan’s wheat pool (a co-op organized to regulate wheat prices) as a modernist project: “Saskatchewan farmers experienced modernity’s spatial and temporal dislocations as intensely as urban people did. They responded by attempting to master the technologies of time-space distancing and employ them for their own ends. They were ‘machine farmers’ in the sense of embracing the organizational machinery. They were also modernist in their celebration of the machine-like qualities of the organization they had created” (“Modernism” 126).

¹¹ Even the prairie grain elevator, a recurring image of rural life in Kroetsch’s novels, can be interpreted as a modernist icon. The architect Le Corbusier saw grain elevators as inspirations for his modernist buildings, as they represented his desire for “functionality and clean lines,” as well as his aesthetically ideal combination of “density and open space” (Bantjes, “Modernism” 127-8). Furthermore, the influential modern architect Frank Lloyd Wright, took inspiration from the North American prairies, developing a “Prairie Style” in the first decade of the twentieth century. In his own comments, Wright insists that his modernist masterpiece Fallingwater (1935) is based on architectural principles dating back to his prairie style. As Robert McCarter points out, Wright’s remarks (supported with reference to the plans of his earlier work) construct a counternarrative to the critical commonplace that reads the design of this house as Wright’s response to “the International Style of architecture that had been canonized in the 1932 Museum of Modern Art Exhibition” (n. pag.). The responses of Le

Throughout his criticism, Kroetsch equates modernity with modernism, seeing both as glorifications of “urban civilization.” In doing so, he consolidates the myth of a Canada lacking in modernism because it exists outside modernity. In his essay “Disunity as Unity: a Canadian Strategy,” Kroetsch asserts that “Canada is a postmodern country” (22). In this assertion, Kroetsch associates his homeland with the valorized term in his modern/postmodern binary opposition in an act of cultural nationalism. To distinguish between modernism and postmodernism, Kroetsch draws upon the examples of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (written in London) and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* (written in New Jersey): “In Eliot I hear still a longing for the unity of story or narrative. In Williams I hear an acceptance of, even a celebration of, multiplicity. The stories that gave centre and circumference to the modern world were losing their centripetal power” (22). For Kroetsch, the works of Williams epitomize postmodernity in that they celebrate “multiplicity” instead of the monolithic culture of Europe that he suggests Eliot is thrall to.¹² Elsewhere, Kroetsch adopts the opening line of Williams’s *Paterson* as a manifesto stating the desire for an organic union of place and literature, suggesting that “a local pride [...] creates an organizing centre,” thereby enabling the cultural “creation” expressed in William’s phrase, “lifting an environment to expression” (“Moment of the Discovery of America Continues” 6). “In “Disunity as Unity,” Kroetsch reiterates this sentiment, placing an additional emphasis on orality: “The local pride speaks. The oral tradition speaks its tentative nature, its freedom from the authorized texts” (32). Kroetsch

Corbusier and Wright to prairie architecture and the prairies themselves attest to the reciprocal relationship between rural and urban modernities in the early twentieth century, a relationship that is antithetical to the stark binary opposition of a pre-modern rural realm and a modern urban environment that is posited by Kroetsch’s fiction.

¹² Other critics see Williams as a European-influenced modernist, albeit one with a different perspective to that of Eliot. In particular, Ruth Grogan emphasizes the influence of modernist art on Williams’s poetry, pointing out that he was fascinated by Dada and Cubism (265-72), and considered Cézanne a “god” (282).

appears to indicate that Canadians have managed to come upon the same ideas as Williams's spontaneously, given that he does not posit any direct links between Canadian writing and Williams's influence. However, it is clear that for Kroetsch what connects Canadian writers and Williams is their mutual rejection of the kind of urban modernity represented by cosmopolitan Europe: "In a high modern world, with its privileged stories, Canada was invisible" (22). In *Labyrinths of Voice* he suggests that "Williams gave us the perfect beginning of a new story when he got mad and said we have to rebel against all those guys who went to Europe while he stayed in New Jersey" (197): the "new story" referred to is postmodernism. However, one of the most unusual aspects of Kroetsch's response to the binary of Modernist/Postmodernist is his insistence that Canada's postmodernism is dependent on a lack of urban culture: the idea that while Modernism is dependent on a "high urban civilization," Canadians "just didn't have any" (*Labyrinths of Voice* 111). With this sweeping statement, Kroetsch erases the existence of Canada's metropolitan heritage, covering over the history of urban Canada that might problematize his assumptions about the parthenogenesis of Canadian postmodernism as a rural phenomenon.

Although he never explicitly deals with issues regarding the urban in any of his critical essays, Kroetsch touches on the opposition of rural versus urban existence in a journal extract from October 1971.¹³ He describes attending a conference on "the Black experience," which he sees as "a parallel to my own, as it relates to the movement from rural to urban. The old/new struggle in the capitalistic West: land as earth and land as commodity. The connection lost, we find it. My deep longing of recent days for the west of my blood and bones. My ancestral west, the prairie west,

¹³ This journal entry is one of several published in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* as "Towards an Essay: My Upstate New York Journals."

the parklands” (141). In this binary opposition of “old/new,” paralleled with the ideas of land as earth versus land as commodity, he signals that he associates his own body, “blood and bones,” with the land of the west itself. As my analysis of his novels argues, Kroetsch idealizes physical connection with the earth, seeing it as a way to escape (urban) modernity. His ideal situation is the organic union of humanity with landscape, and as he admits in his journals, he can only envision this in a rural context: “Loften Mitchell, the Black playwright, and his wife Marjorie were over last night. We drank rum and I listened to Loften thinking aloud about his Harlem life, and I realized my vision is so little of the urban experience, so much of man and nature meeting, man and animal, man and machine. I have never felt in my bones the total city” (“Towards an Essay” 142). This sense of disconnection from urban life means that Kroetsch’s novels continue to reinforce the white Canadian literary tradition that brings human beings and nature into contact, a tradition that is a racially specific one that ignores the “urban landscape populated with the usual suspects of Canadian migrant cultures,” as Rinaldo Walcott indicates in his discussion of Dionne Brand (284).

In an interview with Alan Twigg published a decade later, Kroetsch ruminates on the idea of the impact of urbanization on Canadians: “What I think is that our roots are very much in small towns and rural communities. Now we are an urban people. This creates problems we have to solve. We have come into our glorious urban centres with a way of thinking that dates back a generation” (110). When Twigg asks, “So our problem is really how to become an urban people,” Kroetsch replies “Yes, that’s what’s fascinating about Canada right now. How in hell do we go about inventing these brand new cities? Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver are surely the three most interesting cities in Canada. Every one of them is full of people trying to

define a new definition of urban” (110). One question that this assertion raises is: why does Kroetsch feel that western Canada’s urban residents need to define “urban” in a new way? In the light of Kroetsch’s equation of “modern” with “urban” elsewhere, it is clear that in this interview he celebrates the inhabitants of the “brand new” cities Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton, seeing these people as postmodern citizens who retain a psychic connection with western Canada’s rural heritage. This is evident in Kroetsch’s comments on his own work-in-progress, as he remarks “I’m not writing about breaking the land anymore. I’m writing about urban people remembering that experience. How we remember it conditions how we act!” (110). An important issue not addressed is, what if you don’t remember “*that experience*” of breaking the land? What if you are third- or fourth-generation urban? What if you are a recent immigrant, or a Native? All are rendered invisible in Kroetsch’s formulation of these “brand new cities.”¹⁴

In the same interview Kroetsch asserts, “I’m against nostalgia. I remember what it was like on the farm. I picked roots and drove a tractor fourteen hours a day,” insisting that “I know that our memory is not of Europe or high culture. Our memory is of work” (111). He then suggests that this “work” – which, clearly, is always thought of as physical contact between people and land – is an influence on other Canadian writers: “Just look at all the good writers on the West Coast who are using logging as a kind of metaphor for getting at an understanding of what they are” (112). If, as Kroetsch suggests in this interview, he is looking for a way to deal with impact

¹⁴ Kroetsch’s focus on western Canadian cities in his conversation with Twigg indicates the existence of an unspoken assumption connecting the older cities of eastern Canada with modernity, as opposed to the antimodernist version of postmodernity which he associates with Calgary, Vancouver and Edmonton. Kroetsch represents Toronto as the modern antithesis to the prairies in one of his earliest pieces of fiction, the short story “That Yellow Prairie Sky,” discussed later in this chapter. Kroetsch’s construction of the binary opposition of modernism/postmodernism can be mapped onto Europe/Canada, but also eastern Canada/western Canada; therefore, Canada is privileged as postmodern in relation to modernist Europe, but western Canada becomes hyper-privileged as it considered to be less modern than eastern Canada.

of a new urbanity in Canadian culture, within his fiction this is depicted as the renunciation of urban life in favour of a nostalgic return to a pre-modern existence. In *Alibi*, Kroetsch's protagonist Dorf, an international traveller in the employ of a Calgary oil baron, is shown to be a fractured and damaged individual who only achieves a sense of "wholeness" by immersion in the soil of the earth, and through adopting a wilderness existence that contrasts with his previous urban existence. Whilst Kroetsch claims to be against nostalgia, time and time again he mourns the loss of a sense of "work" as manual labour connecting the self with the natural world. Kim Sawchuck comments on antimodernist nostalgia in late nineteenth century art, remarking that this is often expressed in a yearning for "a past of seasonal artisanal or agricultural work outside the regularities of wage labour," and in "the desire for a return to a perceived historical moment in time when the sense of time accommodated the rhythms of the body, the movements of the sun, the rotation of the earth, and the passing of the seasons" (161). A century later, Kroetsch's works are saturated with this nostalgia, indicating his participation in the continuum of antimodern sentiment existing within modernism from the nineteenth century to the present day. If Kroetsch seems to approve of the exciting possibilities of urban existence emerging in western Canada in his interview with Twigg, throughout his novels he emphatically connects modernity, and urban modernity in particular, with the degeneration of humanity's integral relationship with nature.

Kroetsch's hostile stance to those writers he deems "modern" is naïve, as his narrowly-defined concept of modernism covers up a long-standing tradition of modernist critique of modernity. Not only does Kroetsch's response to the idea of postmodernism directly equate modernism with modernity, but it also suggests that postmodernism can only ever exist in opposition to modernism/modernity. In doing

so, he renders invisible a long-existent tendency within aesthetic modernism, the fact that “modernist” writing is often an indictment of modernity rather than a celebration. Many postmodern critiques of modernity are continuations of a history of “antimodern modernism,” wherein modernist writers and artists express their distaste for impacts of technology and industry on culture and society.¹⁵

While debates about the boundaries of modernity and postmodernity abounded in the academy during the nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties, in recent years these discussions have been sidelined. Yet, I argue, such debates continue to be relevant in the present day. Andreas Huyssen has commented on the redundancy of debates about the so-called end of modernity, asserting that in the twenty-first century:

Modernity is now (and has been for some time) everywhere, and the discourse of postmodernity seems only an episode (if a significant one) within a certain transformation of Western modernity itself. The issue facing critics, therefore, is no longer modernity vs. postmodernity (although this inevitably reductive binary still underlies much of the currently popular antimodernity thinking that issues from a narrowly understood postcolonial approach). The issue is rather what Arjun Appadurai has identified as modernity-at-large, and what others have described as alternative modernities (366).

Discussions about the impact of modernity continue to resonate within the realm of globalization studies.

This thesis exposes the contradictions in Kroetsch’s work. While in his criticism Kroetsch celebrates a “superior” modernity called postmodernity, in his fiction he reveals a profound antagonism to modernity, a reaction so profound that he

¹⁵ For a discussion of “antimodern modernism” in early twentieth century Canada, see Benedict Anderson, “Introduction to Part Two: Staging Antimodernism in the Age of High Capitalist Nationalism.”

suggests the desirability of the end of modernity, not as the entry point into a glorious era of postmodernity, but rather as the retrieval of an idyllic time of pre-modernity. Throughout Kroetsch's fiction he valorizes a rural existence ideally uncontaminated by the impact of modernity (as in, for example, *When Sick for Home*, *The Words of My Roaring*, *What the Crow Said* and *The Puppeteer*), or, in a move that takes his protagonists even further away from modernity as he imagines it, by suggesting the possibility of a wilderness existence epitomized by the lives of indigenous peoples (as in *But We Are Exiles* and *Gone Indian*). This tendency locates Kroetsch's works within the modernist tradition.

In my exploration of Kroetsch and modernity, I refer to the works of another Canadian critic often associated with postmodernism, Marshall McLuhan. Throughout this thesis I argue that McLuhan and Kroetsch both participate in the modernist tradition of the critique of modernity. Two of McLuhan's important works from the early nineteen-sixties, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, are critiques of the negative impact of modernity, typified by the technologies of writing and printing, upon the sensory balance of human beings. For McLuhan, writing is a technology that has had a deplorable effect upon humanity, leading to the imbalance of the senses as the audile-tactile "tribal" world is replaced by a visual society on its way towards modernity: "men left the closed world of the tribe for the 'open society,' exchanging an ear for an eye by means of the technology of writing" (*Understanding Media* 139). He argues that this situation worsens with the invention of the printing press, suggesting that "It was not until the experience of mass production of exactly uniform and repeatable type, that the fission of the senses occurred, and the visual dimension broke away from the other senses" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 54). For McLuhan, then, the invention of the printing press ushers in the dawn of a new era of

mechanization, leading to fragmentation of humanity's sensory involvement with the world. McLuhan sees literate man and woman as "schizophrenic" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 23). Technology has altered sensory balance, as "any sense when stepped up to high intensity can act as an anaesthetic for other senses," leading to "a break in the ratio among the senses, a kind of loss of identity" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 24). He associates modernity with a visual bias as encapsulated by the idea of print culture. In the modernized, mechanized era, McLuhan suggests that auditory aspects have been relegated to the background, leading to the "reduction or distortion of all experience to the scale of one sense only," ultimately contributing to the "Homogenization of men and materials" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 125, 127). Ironically, he suggests that it is through the discovery of new technologies that the sensory imbalance imposed on humanity by the sequential, linear, fragmented world of mechanization can be remedied: electronic technologies will enable the return of the "organic function of interplay and interdependence" of the senses (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 7).

Crucially, in McLuhan's view, this organic interplay and interdependence already existed prior to the impact of the modernization epitomized by the adoption of print technology. While McLuhan has been represented as postmodern luminary, his desire is to recapture the organic unity of sense and world that he sees as being a vital part of pre-modern life. As Mark Krupnick points out, McLuhan "believed that the aesthetic-perceptual superiority of the new electronic media will make for a return to a lost wholeness of apprehension [...] his main point was that new electronic modes of communication are creating a 'global village' that will restore some central features of the unified, interdependent, oral-aural culture of the Middle Ages" (108). Although McLuhan's rejection of modernity is similar to that of Kroetsch, his ultimate message is very different. McLuhan celebrates the period prior to the

machine age as a time of authentic wholeness. Similarly, Kroetsch sees the time before mechanization as an era of organic unity between humanity and nature. However, for McLuhan, the electronic era beckons the return of this lost, idyllic time, whereas Kroetsch views electronic technology with the same contempt that he bestows on mechanical machinery.

Clearly finding some elements of his work attractive, Kroetsch incorporates McLuhan's writings into his conception of postmodernism. Dismissing the idea that Canada had a culture of modernism, Kroetsch argues that "McLuhan seems to emerge suddenly as a postmodernist figure, with little or nothing to prepare his way. He illustrates what I mean by saying that we came into contemporary writing easily" (*Labyrinths of Voice* 112). In order to valorize McLuhan as a postmodernist within his antimodernist schema, Kroetsch must ignore one of the most striking features of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*: McLuhan's irrefutable location of his own work within what Kroetsch dismisses as "high modernism." Like Kroetsch, McLuhan is critical of technological modernization (although he makes an exception for electronic technologies which he feels are capable of healing the detrimental effects of modernity on human consciousness). However, McLuhan valorizes modernist writing, which he sees as taking a defiant stance against the negative modernity that he represents in the figure of the Gutenberg man. For him, Joyce "discovered the means of living simultaneously in all cultural modes while quite conscious" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 74); he praises Joyce for reintroducing into twentieth-century literature the audile-tactile qualities missing since the invention of the printing press, saying "the language of Joyce only comes alive when read aloud, creating a synesthesia or interplay of the senses" (83). He expresses his admiration for Gertrude Stein, whose writing "with its lack of punctuation and other visual aids, is a carefully

devised strategy to get the passive visual reader into participant, oral action”; a positive quality he also finds in “E. E. Cummings, or Pound, or Eliot” (83).

In particular, McLuhan sees modernist stream of consciousness as a vital mode of writing that recaptures the wholeness of pre-modern sensory interplay, citing G. H. Bantock’s suggestion that “in a world of increasing socialization, standardization, and uniformity, the aim was to [...] assert other modes through which human beings can express themselves, to see life as a series of emotional intensities involving a logic different from the rational world and capturable only in dissociated images or stream of consciousness musings” (qtd. in *Gutenberg Galaxy*: 279). Elena Lamberti highlights the influence of modernist writers on the works of McLuhan: “In the experimental works of modernist writers, the medium (writing) is somehow the message, as new technical devices are developed to convey a new world vision. McLuhan, himself a scholar of the modernist literary and artistic movements, learnt this lesson and, in turn, applied it to his critical analysis of the new media-induced environment” (64). He has remarked that he saw his analysis of late twentieth century culture as “applied Joyce” (Lamberti 66).¹⁶ Importantly, what McLuhan takes from “high modernist” writers such as Joyce is the paradoxical possibility of representing in writing the holistic relationship between human beings and the world, a relationship which he argues in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* has been endangered by the modernization unleashed by the invention of the printing press.

It is quite clear that, despite Kroetsch’s assertions to the contrary, McLuhan did not spring from nowhere, and that there were plenty of materials that paved his way. The problem for Kroetsch is that these materials were the key texts of European

¹⁶ Dominic Manganiello also explores the influence upon McLuhan of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in “Retracing the Labyrinth of Modernism: McLuhan and the Aesthetic Moment,” Moss and Morra, 85-94.

and American modernists. In constructing a narrative of the spontaneous generation of Canadian postmodern writing, a narrative that by its very nature centralizes Canada, Kroetsch eliminates any sense that writers such as McLuhan could possibly have influences that were non-Canadian in origin, demonstrating his cultural-nationalist bias towards the concept of an autochthonous postmodernism. Furthermore, in concealing the influence of modernist writers on McLuhan, Kroetsch disguises their impact on his own writing. I feel that Kroetsch finds in McLuhan a voice who shares his own distaste for the type of modernization that results from unchecked mechanization. The crucial distinction between the two writers is that McLuhan sees the twentieth century representing the succession of the mechanical era by a superior “electric age” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 1): “In the electronic age which succeeds the typographic and mechanical era of the past five hundred years, we encounter new shapes and structures of human interdependence and of expression which are ‘oral’ in form even when the components of the situation may be non-verbal” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 3). As my analysis of Kroetsch’s fiction shows, he does not have the same optimism as McLuhan regarding electronic technologies. In contrast with McLuhan, Kroetsch is technophobic to the extreme, viewing all forms of mechanical and electronic technology as threatening to the (pre-modern) ideal of an organic relationship between people and the world around them.

Both McLuhan and Kroetsch are concerned with the paradox of engaging in a critique of the written word conducted in the medium of writing. While initially taking his inspiration from modernist writers such as Joyce, McLuhan increasingly turns towards multimedia, for example by releasing *The Medium is the Massage* in both print and audio LP formats, and by effectively becoming a “performance artist,” disseminating his ideas in presentations to prominent multinational companies, and

even playing himself in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (Krupnick 119). In contrast, Kroetsch continues to be a writer. In the course of this thesis, I discuss various strategies undertaken by Kroetsch to use writing in ways that counteract its connotations of modernity. One such strategy is to write texts which emphasize the "oral tradition" that he associates with idealized antimodern life epitomized by rural Canadian culture, exemplified by characters such as Louie Cormier and Grandmother Lang in *When Sick for Home*, Johnnie Backstrom in *The Words of My Roaring*, Hazard Lepage in *The Studhorse Man*, and Peek in *The Man from the Creeks*. Another strategy is to draw attention to the physical act of writing (or in the case of *What the Crow Said*, the act of setting type), a motif that occurs in texts including *The Studhorse Man*, *Alibi* and *The Puppeteer*. Kroetsch also uses organic metaphors in *Alibi*, connecting the act of writing in a journal with that of tending a garden. In *The Puppeteer* he draws parallels between the act of writing and the creation of folk art, a cultural form that is highly valued in antimodernist discourse for its connotations of authenticity. Each of these strategies signals Kroetsch's desire to imbue his written texts with the audile-tactile qualities of organic wholeness. While in several of his most overtly self-reflexive texts written in the late 1960s and early 1970s (*The Studhorse Man*, *Gone Indian* and *Badlands*) Kroetsch gestures towards the celebration of the textuality of the text that was commonplace in American postmodern writing at the time, such an attitude is counterbalanced by his continued privileging of orality and tactility in these novels. Even in his most overtly self-reflexive texts, Kroetsch maintains his antimodern emphasis on asserting the primacy of the realm of the audile-tactile.

Kroetsch's antipathy to modernization locates his writings within a long tradition of modernist critique of modernity. In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, an

influential study of the concepts of modernism and modernity, Marshall Berman suggests that “We might even say that to be fully modern is to be antimodern,” in the sense that “it has been impossible to grasp and embrace the modern world’s potentialities without loathing and fighting some of its most palpable realities” (14). He argues that the antipathy towards modernity that is part of the modern experience has “engendered numerous nostalgic myths of pre-modern Paradise Lost” (15). Berman maintains a crucial distinction between modernity and modernism, seeing “modernity” as a mode of experience that equates with contemporary life, and “modernism” as “an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization” (16). While he values nineteenth century modernist artists, whom he sees as being “simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life, wrestling inexhaustibly with its ambiguities and contradictions” (24), Berman suggests that their twentieth century successors “have lurched far more toward rigid polarities and flat totalizations” (24). The blanket acceptance or rejection of modernity demonstrated by such artists indicates that “in either case, [modernity] is conceived as a closed monolith, incapable of being shaped or changed by modern men” (24). Kroetsch’s fiction demonstrates his frustration with a “closed” modernity, one which he rejects in favour of the ideal of retrieving a pre-modern era. This is a rejection of modernity as Berman sees it, but it is not incompatible with the idea of modernism as an artistic endeavour. Significantly, Kroetsch’s late twentieth century project echoes a similar tendency in Canadian culture in the 1910s and 1920s. Ryan Edwardson draws attention to the “‘antimodern’, or ‘antimodern modernist’, reaction to modernity in which ‘authenticity’ and ‘realism’ were sought through physical and spiritual experiences,

often including the construction of an ‘imagined past’ and simpler ‘folk’ existence” (86).¹⁷

While Berman maintains a distinction between “modernity” and “modernism,” Matei Calinescu makes a case for distinguishing between “two distinct and bitterly conflicting modernities” (41). He argues that during the nineteenth century “an irreversible split occurred between modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization – a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism – and modernity as an aesthetic concept” (41). Although Berman and Calinescu differ in their terminology, it is clear that both see an oppositional element existing in their constructions of modernity. For Berman, “modernism” is an aesthetic reaction to the condition of modernity, which in its most complex forms both celebrates and denigrates its impact, restoring subjectivity to a Western humanity threatened by modernization. Calinescu sees this opposition in terms of two kinds of modernity, “aesthetic” versus “bourgeois” or “capitalist.” In contrast, I feel that Kroetsch conflates modernity and modernism into a monolithic totalization. He rejects both modernism and modernity because, for him, these are identical with “modernization,” the impact of industry and urbanization. Throughout Kroetsch’s fiction, western and northern Canada are places that resist modernization. His most recent novel *The Man from the Creeks* is narrated by a character who has survived from the Klondike gold rush of 1896-99 to live in the late 1990s, during which time he has seen the metropolis of Dawson City – once home to 30,000 people and the biggest city in the Canadian west – dwindle to a population of 1,400. Kroetsch’s description of the

¹⁷ For other explorations of antimodernism in early twentieth century Canadian culture, see Gerta Moray’s “Emily Carr and the Traffic in Native Images,” Lora Senechal Carney’s “Modernists and Folk on the Lower St Lawrence: the Problem of Folk Art,” and Ian McKay’s “Handicrafts and the Logic of ‘Commercial Antimodernism: the Nova Scotia Case,” in Linda Jessup’s *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience*.

garden of the narrator's cabin emphasizes the resurgence of the indigenous plants that have reclaimed the yard of the narrator's cabin from modernity: "The berry bushes took over, mostly kinnickinnick" (217). The novel functions as a fantasy of stalled modernization.

Kroetsch's profoundly pessimistic take on modernity indicates that his "postmodernism" is a form of antimodernism, a deeply nostalgic attempt to recapture a "pre-modern Paradise Lost," to reiterate Berman's phrase. This also locates his works within a Canadian tradition of "antimodernism," such as that represented by the painters of the Algonquin School, as discussed by Ryan Edwardson.¹⁸ Furthermore, Edwardson draws attention to the myths of Canadian cultural nationalism that portray the Algonquin painters and the later Group of Seven as artists who "channelled the Canadian 'spirit' to produce a national art free from external influence," despite their exposure to European modernist art and criticism (81). Recent criticism has "insightfully placed the artists within an 'antimodern' reaction to Canadian modernity which involved the quest for an 'authentic' and 'real' experience through the outdoors and a landscape art" during a period of rapid modernization and urbanization in Canada (Edwardson 81). Lynda Jessup's analysis of the writings of the Group of Seven and of contemporaneous newspaper reports demonstrates the creation of a mythology in which "the 'real' Canadian artist stood outside the constraints of civilization, whether socially (in the guise of the prospector, bushwhacker, or woodsman) or developmentally (in the figure of Lismer's impudent child)" (133).

Kroetsch's late twentieth century "antimodern modernism" – his version of postmodernism – does not exist in a vacuum, as it is part of a tradition of artistic

¹⁸ A precursor to the more famous Group of Seven, the Algonquin School comprised Tom Thomson, J.E.H. MacDonald, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer and F.H. Varley, working from 1912-17. Formed in 1920, the Group of Seven included several members of the Algonquin School – MacDonald, Harris, Jackson, Lismer, and Varley – with the addition of Franklin Carmichael and Frank Johnston. Later A.J. Casson, Edwin Holgate and Lemoine Fitzgerald became members.

reaction against modernity within Canadian culture. In order to represent his reaction against modernity as postmodernism, Kroetsch obscures the precedents within his country, as well as the external influences of the European aesthetic modernism which critiques cultures of modernization.¹⁹

Significantly, in the light of Kroetsch's dismissal of European influence, he had the experience of studying at an institution that embraced an ethos combining the study of aesthetic modernism with a desire to record and preserve Alberta folk traditions. In *Hiding the Audience*, her study of cultural institutions in Western Canada, Frances W. Kaye points out that Alberta's premier arts establishment, the Banff Centre (where Kroetsch participated in a creative writing summer school while still "Fresh from the farm" in 1947 [79]) was inspired by Danish "Folk High Schools," which had been established in the 1840s "to provide adult education, preserve folk ways, and establish the foundations for a national culture" (61). Donald Cameron, the second director of the Banff school, was inspired by these Danish schools, which served a cultural nationalist project: "The folk schools had developed in opposition to the metropolis and with the specific mandate of preserving the culture that was rooted in the land of a specific region" (61). Resulting from his travels in Denmark, Cameron began a "Folklore project" at Banff which involved "interviewing old timers around the province," which Kaye sees as "a vital step in developing art forms specific to the West, ones that borrowed European forms but developed them with western Canadian settler content" (62). It is significant that the European culture

¹⁹ Antimodernism is particularly evident in European art of the fin-de-siècle. Elizabeth C. Childs discusses the Tahitian paintings of Paul Gauguin in terms of their primitivist antimodernism. Similarly, Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński emphasizes the reaction against modernity represented by Vincent van Gogh's Arles paintings; a similar point is made by Robert Hughes, who comments on the representation of "manufacture invading nature" in van Gogh's depictions of factories in Clichy (327). While these examples are from visual art, they clearly point to an underlying reaction against modernity in artistic work at the end of the nineteenth century, a reaction which I argue continues to be manifested within modernism in the twentieth century.

“borrowed” on behalf of the Banff Centre is notable for its antimodernism and anti-metropolitanism. As I have noted, these cultural tendencies represent a significant strand of modernist discourse and artistic output. Kroetsch’s affiliation with these tendencies therefore indicates his participation in a long-established culture of antimodernism, rather than supporting his assertion that Canadian writing has leapt from the Victorian to the postmodern.

Kaye parallels Denmark’s situation with Canadian rural culture, emphasizing that the Banff director Cameron saw that the Danish Folk High Schools “had developed in direct response to the needs of a rural population in a country that risked losing its own culture to pressures from its powerful neighbours, Germany and Sweden” (66). Within this statement is the implicit view that Canada has its own powerful neighbour, which its cultural nationalists endeavour to resist. Throughout Canadian contemplations of (post)coloniality, a striking feature is the emphasis placed upon the idea of the United States as a new imperial power, whose colonization of Canada occurs not via military conquest or settlement, but through the technologies of modernity, through capital investment (another aspect of “bourgeois” modernity, as defined by Calinescu), and through control of the media. Writing in the nineteen sixties, the conservative Canadian philosopher George Grant equates “modernity” with America. For Grant, Canada is a “local culture” which is under threat from America, or rather, from the modernity that America represents, as “Canadians live next to a society that is the heart of modernity” (4). He believes that “nearly all Canadians think that modernity is good, so nothing essential distinguishes Canadians from Americans. When they oblate themselves before ‘the American way of life,’ they offer themselves on the altar of the reigning Western goddess” (4-5), and are incorporated in “the banality of existence in technological societies” (7). Three

decades later, Diana Brydon suggests that its proximity to America means that Canada exists in a “neo-colonial present” as a result of “the transnational corporations based mainly in the United States who currently dominate cultural production and transmission in Canada” (“Reading” 175): in other words, control of the “electronic era” heralded by McLuhan has been seized by America.

Like Grant, Kroetsch draws attention to the idea that, for Canadians, “To the south of us is a huge technocracy, a world of power (“The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition” 53). In this essay, Kroetsch introduces a new binary, noise and silence, to compare the United States and Canada. For Kroetsch, “The world of technocracy is especially a world of noise; sophisticated noise, exciting noise, destructive noise” (53-4). If American technocracy is represented by noise, then Kroetsch finds among his fellow Canadian writers “a peculiar will towards silence” (54). Significantly, Kroetsch sees “silence” in terms of “the natural, the *uncreated*, if you will,” which he suggests is encapsulated by “the north”: “The north is not a typical American frontier, a natural world to be conquered and exploited. Rather, in spite of inroads, it remains a true wilderness, a continuing presence. We don’t want to conquer it. Sometimes we want it to conquer us” (54). In this construction, Kroetsch indicates his belief that the American technocracy wants to conquer nature as signified by the wilderness, whereas the Canadian anti-technocracy wants to be conquered by it. Once again Kroetsch signals his reaction against a modernity equated with modernization, in a manner that simultaneously asserts a Canadian cultural nationalism. In this instance, however, Kroetsch is not so naïve as to neglect the existence of a Canadian metropolis within the wilderness: “The city of Edmonton, for me, is a place – and a metaphor [...] Conveniently, we have in Edmonton a technological centre that bills itself as The Gateway to the North. I am

fascinated by characters who approach the city, resist it, leave it, enter it” (54). In the novels *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian* Kroetsch envisions the revenge of nature and Natives against the city of Edmonton, signalling his own desire to “resist” the city and the technological culture that it represents.²⁰

One of the most interesting aspects of Kroetsch’s conception of what might be deemed postcolonialism is the linkage established between colonization and modernization in a frequently cited article, “Disunity as Unity.” In this essay, first delivered as a conference paper in 1985, Kroetsch draws attention to two events that occurred one hundred years previously, namely, the execution of Louis Riel following the defeat of his Métis rebellion, and the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. What is significant is that by making this comparison, Kroetsch contrasts Riel’s doomed indigenous resistance with a prime example of the modernization unleashed by imperialism: “Two narratives, here, come into violent discord” (21). Kroetsch indicates that since this time, the CPR narrative (which, I suggest, represents the narrative of empire as vehicle of modernization) has been devalued in the Canadian imagination, while the Riel story “has become the stuff of our imaginative life” (21).²¹ Significantly, while Kroetsch agrees with Jean-François Lyotard’s definition

²⁰ Elsewhere, Kroetsch suggests that the people of Edmonton are themselves resistant to technological modernity, by virtue of their preoccupation with the gold rush of 1896-1899. In his travel book *Alberta* (1968), Kroetsch visits Edmonton during its annual recreation of the era of the gold rush, Klondike Days. The fortune of the city of Edmonton was made by the Gold Rush, as prospectors bought their mining outfits and provisions before embarking on the treacherous inland route north. Klondike Days celebrates this pivotal moment in the history of Edmonton. During the festival, citizens of the city don clothing of the era in order to recreate the spirit of the Gold Rush. Kroetsch comments that: “The success of this festival/wing-ding/ceremony, this nine-day wonder, does not reside in its carnival or its excellent livestock show or its parade of fireworks or visiting starlets, but in a single moment: that precious and ultimate moment when the Klondiker, in his high-rise apartment or suburban bungalow, in his West End mansion or rented basement-flat, *puts on his costume*” (143). He emphasizes the significance of this act: “In putting on a costume we abandon our old identities. We cast off, slough off, an old self, like a snake getting rid of a skin that’s too tight” (143). Significantly the “old identity” sloughed off is that which participates in late twentieth-century technological modernity. Thirty years after the publication of *Alberta*, Kroetsch continues to reiterate this idea in *The Man from the Creeks*.

²¹ It is interesting to note that although Kroetsch draws attention to literary responses to Riel’s rebellion in this essay (21), he neglects to mention E.J. Pratt’s long poem about the building of the CPR, “Towards the Last Spike.” As a modernist work celebrating “man’s struggle against nature” (D.G.

of postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (*Postmodern Condition* xxiv), asserting that “by Lyotard’s definition, Canada is a postmodern country” because “Canadians cannot agree on what their meta-narrative is” (22, 21), the fact that he draws attention to Riel’s hold over Canada’s “imaginative life” suggests otherwise. I argue that while Kroetsch endorses Lyotard’s message that the postmodern era signals a time of incredulity towards the metanarrative of modernization, he replaces this with another metanarrative, an unproblematic romantic myth of the Canadian “integral” man epitomized by Riel.

The texts selected for discussion in his essay indicate Kroetsch’s preoccupation with opposing modernity. He praises Rudy Wiebe’s novel *The Temptation of Big Bear* for depicting the way “the forces of ‘civilization’ destroy a prospering civilization that was based on a buffalo economy and the complex inter-relatedness of tribal life and geography,” emphasizing that “The railway, in Wiebe’s book – the iron horse of 1885 – announces the arrival of a new story – of immigration, of dustbowl economics, of life and death on the reservation” (29). In the course of this essay, Kroetsch is effectively continuing the project of antimodern modernist Canadian artists such as the Group of Seven, whose renunciation of modernization was connected with their desire to distinguish Canada from its former colonial power centre, the United Kingdom. As Benedict Anderson points out, “one can see the Group’s (modernist) antimodernism and anti-industrialism as a symbolic way of separating itself decisively from what, even as late as 1920, was one of the world metropolises of industrial modernity” (“Introduction” 99). Far from being a spontaneous eruption from the soil of Canada itself in the late twentieth century, as Kroetsch’s comments might indicate, Canadian postmodernism (at least in the form

Jones 241), Pratt’s poem does not fit in with Kroetsch’s suggestion that Canadian literature bypassed modernism en route to postmodernism (22).

that Kroetsch envisions) is foreshadowed within the culture of the nation in the early twentieth century.

Throughout Kroetsch's fiction, an underlying theme is that the era of "complex inter-relatedness of tribal life and geography" can be recaptured by the "postcolonial" nation, a nation that values the oral culture associated with the tribal world, enabling a psychic return to a time before colonization and the resulting modernization. In this respect, he exhibits similar sentiments to those of McLuhan once again, albeit with an important difference. As Paul Grosswiler discusses, "the concept of the 'other' can be seen reflected in McLuhan's contrast of Western and traditional cultures, as well as the collision between the visual culture of the Enlightenment and postmodern electronic media culture. For the alienated and fragmented visual culture, the alien 'other' is the acoustic culture. However, this otherness is supposed to be resolved by the emergence of an acoustic electronic culture" (169). For McLuhan, electronic technology will liberate Western men and women into a tribal existence, whereas for Kroetsch, a tribal, wilderness existence will rescue participants in Western civilization from technology.

Linda Hutcheon expresses Canada's "post-colonialism" in terms of the binary oppositions of "Empire and colony, imperial metropolis and provincial hinterland" ("Circling" 71), a construction that highlights once again the conflation of Canada with a wilderness zone that stands in opposition to the "metropolis" signifying European modernity. She writes of "modernism's ahistorical rejection of the burden of the past," suggesting that postmodern and postcolonial art differ in that they continue to value and evaluate the past: "postmodern art has sought self-consciously (and often parodically) to reconstruct its relationship to what came before," while postcolonial art does the same, but with a particular emphasis on "the revalued local

past” (73). Hutcheon therefore establishes a binary opposition between modernism, which she sees as rejecting the past, and a postmodernism/postcolonialism which engages with it in order “to respect the particular and the local” (75).²² Needless to say, Hutcheon reiterates the commonplace equation of modernism with modernity, neglecting the significant oppositional element that occurs within many modernist artistic pieces and texts. Furthermore, although Hutcheon discusses Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*, in which the narrator recalls learning as a child in school of the binary opposition between “native” and “civilized” within colonial discourse (“The Indians in Canada did not have the wheel or telephones, and ate the hearts of their enemies in the heathenish belief that it would give them courage. The British Empire changed all that. It brought in electric lights” [79, qtd in Hutcheon, “Circling” 78]), she neglects the antimodernist sentiments evident in this example. Atwood’s ironic tone suggests a possible inversion wherein the trappings of modernity epitomize the real “savagery”: a reversal of the binary opposition of civilization and barbarian in which the modernization represented by the colonial power is re-evaluated as destructive.²³

Throughout Kroetsch’s fiction he engages with the idea of technological modernization, indicating that this version of progress conceals the loss of an organic relationship between humanity and the world, and the capitulation of oral (or audile-tactile in McLuhan’s terms) culture to the visual bias associated with modernity. For

²² This binary opposition forms the basis of Hutcheon’s *Poetics of Postmodernism*, in which she defines “postmodernism” based upon the term as used in the field of architecture, the art form that offered the earliest descriptions of the concept. Postmodern architectural theorists and practitioners such as Robert Ventura, Charles Jencks and Paolo Portoghesi offer a critique of the ideology and practice of modernist architecture, in particular the utopian ethos which led to the planning and design of totalizing urban developments which “lacked the complexity of life and continuity with the past that any old, bungled city, with all its faults, possessed” (Jencks qtd. in Calinescu: 282). Hutcheon sees the project of the postmodernist architect as offering a critical examination of “modernism’s dogmatic reductionism, its inability to deal with ambiguity and irony, and its denial of the validity of the past,” and to replace such “dogma” with buildings designed to evoke “historical and social curiosity” while offering an “ironic, yet involved” response to the modernist masters, and indicates that postmodern literature operates in the same manner as postmodern architecture (*Poetic of Postmodernism*, 30).

²³ Ideas relating to the negative consequences of technological modernization are also prevalent in Atwood’s apocalyptic novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003).

Kroetsch, a renewed focus on orality is also related to his desire to overcome Canada's colonial heritage. Darren Wershler-Henry suggests that "Kroetsch privileges the oral over the written not only because it allows the establishing of notions of origin, but also because it allows him to bring into play notions of the validity and authenticity of the local voice that makes resistance against the voices of the (Imperial) center(s) possible" (71). In favouring voice over writing, Kroetsch reveals his phonocentrism, as he associates speech with authenticity in a manner that has been critiqued by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*. Throughout Kroetsch's writings, the binary opposition of print versus voice is also mapped onto another pair of binary terms, empire versus colony. These paired binaries – in which the second term is more highly valued – are contributing factors in many of Kroetsch's works of fiction. Linking these concepts with McLuhan's ideas, it is clear that print (produced by technology) is connected with modernity, while voice is associated with an idealized pre-modern existence. Accordingly, Kroetsch's use of these binaries signals his belief that Canada is not only resistant to the former empire, but it is superior to it by virtue of its oral culture. Kroetsch's phonocentrism therefore plays an important role in his contribution to the mythologies of Canadian cultural nationalism.

Throughout the discussions of Canada's "postcoloniality" occurring throughout the nineteen nineties and into the twenty-first century, critics have neglected the important dimension of antimodernism in their cultural nationalist desire to locate Canada within evolutionary, progressive models that equate "post" with "better."²⁴ What is also important to remember is that many white Canadian settler writers, including Kroetsch, Wiebe and Atwood, envision technological progress as "bad," but see the renunciation of such technologies as a form of progress

²⁴ While Diana Brydon critiques Donna Bennett's "evolutionary model" in "Reading Postcoloniality, Reading Canada" (172), she does not discuss the issue of antimodernism in contemporary Canadian texts.

in itself. In Kroetsch's use of the terms, in effect he suggests that "post-"modernism is receptive to rural location, whereas "modernism" is associated entirely with metropolises and the realm of the international. His "postmodernism" is concerned with the re-evaluation of what can be called the un-modern environment. This might be described as "landscape," borrowing from a statement made by Kroetsch in an interview with J'nan Morse Sellery: "landscape for me is where human beings, and what we mean by nature, interact" (23). In Kroetsch's use of the word "landscape" it is possible to detect an implicit binary opposition with "cityscape" as, throughout his novels, cities represent the disconnection between human beings and the natural world. The un-modern environment of landscape is connected with oral culture in Kroetsch's eyes, as he suggests "The oral tradition, become literary tradition, points us back to our own landscape, our own recent ancestors, and the expressions and modes of our own speech" ("Moment" 7).

Throughout Kroetsch's criticism and fiction he demonstrates ambivalence about the possibility of reference, in other words, the desire of the word and world to match up and connect. In dialogue with Diane Bessai he remarks that "For novelists like John Barth and William Gass and Robert Coover, the connection between word and world is gone. Beckett's Watt, muttering the word 'pot,' cannot connect word and object" (210). In conversation with Neuman and Wilson, Kroetsch admits that he is "troubled by the sense of language as an end in itself" (*Labyrinths* 142-3), indicating his discomfort with post-structuralist theories of language. Elsewhere, Kroetsch writes specifically about *colonial* words, and their failure to connect with Canadian reality, a sentiment shared by his contemporary Dennis Lee, who comments "A poem enacts in

words the presence of what we live among” (60).²⁵ In Kroetsch’s “Unhiding the Hidden,” what initially appears to be a gap between word and world is actually a gap between an American or British word and the Canadian world. The idea of “un-naming” for Kroetsch does not mean abandoning referentiality or the idea of the rooting of language in a local authenticity, as his discussion implies that a word that may be inappropriate in Canada might be appropriately referential back in Britain or the United States. He argues that Canadian writers resolve “the painful tension between appearance and authenticity” by “uninvent[ing] the world,” but suggests that the writers that he discusses (including Wiebe, Atwood and Laurence) renounce British or American definitions of words in favour of autochthonous Canadian meanings, which he suggests are “authentic” because they are rooted in Canada’s landscape.

Among the novels praised in this essay are Atwood’s *Surfacing*, in which Kroetsch sees the unnamed narrator (whom he describes elsewhere as “a city person gone into the country” [“No Name” 50]) ridding herself of her inauthentic modern life as she rejects the modernity encapsulated in her childhood books and scrapbooks, eventually adopting an animal identity in a wilderness setting. Kroetsch suggests that Atwood’s narrator “will give birth to herself” (60), an image that mirrors his declaration of the self-generated existence of Canadian postmodernism. In Atwood’s text, Kroetsch finds an analogue for his own insistence upon antimodernism as a vital factor in Canadian national identity formation.

In the same essay, Kroetsch discusses Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear*. In Wiebe’s novel the character Corporal Sleigh is said to have “never read a

²⁵ Lee, for example, claims to have succeeded at hearing the word “city” as a Canadian word, but tellingly, he uses an image in which landscape supersedes the metropolitan cityscape in a vision of the erasure of modernity: “Hearing it was like watching the contours of an unexpected continent gradually declare themselves through the familiar lawns and faces of your block” (55).

book because people in them never walked in mud.... You never got the sense of anyone being downright dirty the way Territories' mud stuck to you in globs...." (Wiebe 272 qtd. in "Unhiding" 62). For Kroetsch, the incorporation of mud into a narrative is what separates inauthentic (colonial) writing from an authentic form of writing that is connected with Canada's landscape: "Wiebe is determined to destroy the sentence itself back to sense, back to its ground" (62). In *Labyrinths of Voice*, while distancing himself from the concept of mimetic literature he announces "I think there is also another kind of *grounding* and for me it's very important to go back and test what I really call *ground*, using that word very deliberately. Ground as something that precedes interpretation or categorization – or what I'm calling meaning" (200-1). In Kroetsch's writing, "ground" indicates the possibility of referentiality, and is linked strongly with the representation of earth or soil.²⁶

Even in his most metafictional texts, Kroetsch demonstrates ambivalence towards the idea of the self-referentiality of language. Other critics have been more forceful on this issue. Edward Said has been highly critical of the concept of "textuality" (*World 4*), claiming that the ideas of European theorists such as Foucault and Derrida have led to the idea that literary theory disavows "anything that is worldly, circumstantial, or socially contaminated" (3). Said rejects the "conception of the text as existing within a hermetic, Alexandrian textual universe" (39). In conversation with J'Nan Morse Sellery and Aritha Van Herk, Kroetsch has commented, "I believe strongly that a book has a subject. And the problem is to find a discourse that gets that world into the book. That speaks the world" (Sellery 23). In

²⁶ In a later essay, Kroetsch describes postmodern culture in terms that emphasize both his obsession with the audile-tactile senses, and his continued valuing of the concept of "ground": "The talking at the boundaries, the conversations where speech and silence meet, where forms and genres shift, where discourses caress or rub against each other, is the stuff, the ground, of postmodern culture" ("The Artist and Postmodern Cultural Policies" 176).

Kroetsch's work demonstrates a tension between a sense that literature is an entirely word-based and hermetic textual system and the idea that his novels connect with a land and people who actually exist. He expresses this in his suggestion that "the postmodern artist elects to stay in the world," in contrast with what he calls modernists: "Where the Modernist artist could become hermetic, this artist will become hermeneutic" ("The Artist and Postmodern Cultural Policies" 180).

While in his criticism and fiction Kroetsch explores the failure of some kinds of writing to connect with western Canadian reality, he indicates that this problem can be solved through human contact with landscape, enabling the "rooting" of words "in authentic experience" ("Unhiding" 59). Significantly, for Kroetsch this authentic rooting of word in experience must occur in an un-modern environment. There are interesting parallels to be made with Barthes's *Mythologies*, as commented on by Rey Chow. In *Mythologies*, Barthes suggests that meanings are unstable and multiple, and that fixed notions of referentiality are no longer viable. Chow highlights Barthes's belief that mythology (which, effectively, is the culture of urban modernity) can capture anything (51-2), but points out that he paradoxically goes on to attach "romanticism to nature and the countryside" as the antithesis to urban artificiality, as he attributes to a woodcutter "real language," or "the certitude of referentiality" (52). Barthes sees in the woodcutter "an *unmediated* relation to language," which is resistant to the processes of bourgeois mythification (53). Of course, as Barthes's text clearly establishes, myth is universal, as it can "reach anything, corrupt anything, and even the very act of refusing oneself to it" (*Mythologies* 132). Barthes's idealization of the rural worker in the form of the woodcutter is related to his nostalgia for a pre-modern "authentic" relationship between human beings, the world, and language: in other words, the myth that informs the culture of antimodernism. Chow points out the

paradox of Barthes's assertions, highlighting that "If mythic signification functions like an inescapable prison-house, Barthes seems to suggest, its spell may nonetheless, miraculously, be broken by the speech of the non-metropolitan labourer, for whom referentiality – and thus resistance – is still possible," while at the same time suggesting the woodcutter's "freedom" is discredited by the universality of myth, meaning that he is "a sign of his own foreclosure from a system that will simply go on 'imagining' him" utopically (53). Like Barthes, Kroetsch sees the possibility of authentic language in rural peoples, but in doing so he participates in the same process of antimodern mythification. The non-metropolitan figures who appear in Kroetsch's work – be they farmers, woodsmen, prospectors, or indigenes – are represented as being "authentic," and therefore resistant to metropolitan mythologies of modernization. In this way, Kroetsch continues to participate in a prominent strand of Canadian national mythmaking, the idealization of the pre-modern.

Throughout his fiction, Kroetsch represents the natural world and the countryside, and those "integral" human beings who maintain an audile-tactile sensory relationship with it, as escaping the mythifications associated with modernization. In a way that Kroetsch himself claims to be unable to pin down exactly, he suggests that art and nature do connect: "I don't believe that art is completely removed from nature but I don't know what the hell nature becomes in art" (*Labyrinths* 73). In another interview he tells Geoff Hancock that writers must establish a "connection [...] back to the world," or "back to the earth," which he believes will counter "the metaphor of upwards [that] is everywhere in our thinking" (50). This idea of the contrast between "upwards" and "back to the earth" is neatly encapsulated by the photographs of plane crashes published in an issue of *boundary 2* on Canadian writing edited by Kroetsch in the early 1970s, images that epitomize his

preference for non-modern over modern, and his disdain for mechanical technology.²⁷

The image of crashing planes recurs in Kroetsch's novel *What the Crow Said*, as part of the pattern of anti-technological sentiments expressed within this text.

In one of his earliest published short stories, "That Yellow Prairie Sky," themes that will recur throughout Kroetsch's work are already apparent. First published in 1956, the story encapsulates the pull of modernity against the traditional prairie occupation of farming. The narrative centres on two brothers, Tom and the unnamed narrator. It is told from the perspective of thirty years after the events, placing its action in the mid-1920s. In the course of the story two brothers, both prairie farmers, marry a pair of sisters. By the end of the tale one couple remains on their prairie farm, while the other moves to Toronto. The story is told from the perspective of the brother who leaves. In the early days of their marriage, the narrator and his wife Julie's relationship is described in terms that connect the dust of the earth and the sensory interplay of their erotic lives: "At noon she brought dinner out to me in the field, out in the sun and the wind, and we sat side by side and talked and laughed, and the dust from my face got on hers sometimes, and sometimes I didn't get started quite on time" (22). In spite of living in this rural idyll, both the farmers and their wives are shown to be desirous of modernization. During a period of good weather and high wheat prices, the narrator's wife Julie describes features of the new house they will build after the harvest, "I'm going to have one of those living room parlours," she said, "one of those living room parlours with lots of windows, like in

²⁷ As William Spanos (who co-founded *boundary 2* with Kroetsch) comments: "I think of the apparently gratuitous photographs included in the issue of *boundary 2* on Canadian literature [Fall 1974] that Kroetsch and Donald Bell contributed, in what I take to be an archly ironic effort to deconstruct the privileged status of the East: on the cover, an airplane soaring panoptically in infinite space, no doubt high above the Western Canadian plains, and the portfolio of pictures, which begins with the cover photo in reverse, followed by several scenes of crashes, in which the onlookers, dots in a wintry wilderness, gaze in bewilderment on the wreckage" (190). Spanos's speculation about Kroetsch's maintenance of an Eastern/Western Canada opposition can be transposed onto the metropolitan/rural and modern/un-modern binaries in play throughout Kroetsch's fiction and criticism.

the magazines, and I'm making drapes for that kind of window" (23). Significantly, Kroetsch links the modernity represented by homogenized interior design with print media, as Tom's wife Kay agrees with her sister, saying "Tom cut some of the nicest plans out of last week's Free Press" (23). The women emphasize their desire for modern technologies. Kay tells Julie that "Tom is going to get me a new washing machine," while Julie replies to her sister, "We might pick up a secondhand car" (23). The narrator ironically notes, "It wasn't long before Julie was talking about the washing machine and Kay was talking about a secondhand car" (23). Although it is the female characters who are initially associated with the desirability of the technologies of modernity, the male characters are just as easily swayed: "We menfolk laughed at the women and we found a few things in the Eaton's catalogue that we could use ourselves. It seemed that somebody was always coming up with something new that we couldn't possibly do without" (23).

Both couples initially envisage remaining in the rural environment while adopting the technologies associated with modernization. However, with the coming of a catastrophe, they are forced to choose between urban and rural life, highlighting the starkness of Kroetsch's "either/or" vision of the acceptance or rejection of modernity. A hailstorm comes when "Julie was working on her drapes" (24), devastating the shack where she and the narrator live, and ruining their crops. When the couple visit Tom and Kay they discover the same devastation. It is at this point where the central exchange of the story takes place: "All of a sudden Tom almost shouted at Kay: 'Say it and get it over with. If you want we'll go to the city and I'll get a job. I can get on a construction gang. They're paying good now. We'll get a washing machine and a secondhand car.' He looked at his wheat fields, beaten flat. 'We'll make a payment and get our own house.'" (25) While Kay initially appears to

respond positively to her husband's suggestion by remarking, "A house with big windows for my new drapes" (25), she goes on to assert her desire to remain in the rural environment even if it means that she forsakes technological modernity: "Tom, I was joking [...] I don't need fancy curtains and a washing machine. And we never needed a car before. Did we, Tom? We got enough for us and Ma and Dad. Haven't we, Tom? And we got next year." (25). Although Tom "snort[s] at that idea," Kay reassures him by gesturing towards the ground: "'We still got this, Tom.' She was kind of crying. She was pointing at the black dirt that showed through the broken grass. 'Look, Tom, we still got this'" (25). For Kroetsch, the "black dirt" represents an "authentic" life, one that stands in opposition to the mythifications of technological and urban modernity. But is there anything more loaded with myth than the concepts of soil, earth, mud, or dirt? In rejecting one type of myth, Kroetsch reinforces the recurring cultural nationalist motif that "the land itself will spawn this new culture" (Gunew 101).

In expressing her desire to remain rooted in the soil of the Canadian west, Kay becomes the first of many of Kroetsch's fictional characters who reject an inauthentic life associated with modernity in favour of an "authentic," antimodern rural existence. While Kay's words convince Tom to stay, the narrator ends the story with the revelation that his wife Julie, "didn't say a word," thus signalling her desire to leave the prairies for an urban existence in Toronto (25). The opening paragraphs of the story, in which the narrator daydreams about a return to the west, indicate his nostalgia for connection with the earth, contributing to the impression that it is Tom and Kay who made the right decision. In this story, as in his subsequent fictions, Kroetsch indicates that when characters are faced with a choice between life in the city or the country, the rural environment will always be the correct option. For

Kroetsch, being part of a landscape rather than a cityscape is to be un-modern, even to be postmodern, and thus it is to escape from the modernization which he inevitably sees in negative terms. It is also to be authentically Canadian. At the heart of Kroetsch's postmodernism is a deeply conservative desire for the preservation of the "wholeness" of a rural culture that he associates with orality and the complete sensory union of human beings with their environment, a concern which has been a recurring motif in Canadian culture since the end of the nineteenth century. Throughout his fiction, this desire is represented by the immersion of his characters in the rural landscape, the wilderness, and even the earth itself, allowing the fragmented subjects of the technological, modern era to become "muddily human" (*Alibi* 172).

Chapter 2: *When Sick for Home*

The unpublished text *When Sick for Home* (1961) predates Kroetsch's published novels.¹ This text has been neglected by scholars of Kroetsch's works; while Aritha Van Herk mentions it briefly in her "Biocritical Essay," it has not received sustained academic attention. Although *When Sick for Home* does not fit into the metafictional paradigm established by his canonical novels *The Studhorse Man*, *Gone Indian* and *Badlands*, it provides many insights into his later works. Within this text are clearly identifiable conservative strands that do not disappear in his subsequent novels. Reading *When Sick for Home* is crucial for understanding the recurring theme of antimodernism in Kroetsch's later, more experimental work. The text exemplifies the desire for unity and wholeness that is constantly reiterated throughout Kroetsch's novels, and which is itself in tension with his stated valorization of the fragmentation of the postmodern world in his interviews and criticism.

In a significant sequence in *When Sick for Home*, a pig is slaughtered prior to a wedding feast. After the farm-machinery dealer Alex MacKinnon unsuccessfully attempts to shoot the animal, the protagonist Martin Lockner uses the traditional method of butchering with a knife. Kroetsch provides a wealth of detail emphasizing the senses of hearing and touch: "The pig squealed"; "He stabbed the knife harder and felt the blade go in with ease after the skin broke"; "He felt the pig's bristles against his little finger, the tremor of the pig's throat, a pulse"; "Martin twisted the knife with

¹ *When Sick for Home* is archived in the Kroetsch Papers in the Special Collections of the University of Calgary. It was written as Kroetsch's creative writing doctoral dissertation in the Department of English at the State University of Iowa, and was submitted in August 1961, earning him a PhD.

a hard jab and suddenly his knife hand was sticky, then hot” (f110-111).² This sequence epitomizes Kroetsch’s concern with traditional rural occupations early in his career as a writer. The imagery relating to the killing of the pig makes evident one of Kroetsch’s preoccupations in this text, and also in his entire fictional oeuvre: the desire for a sense of organic unity in the face of fragmentation of the self and senses believed to be caused by a dehumanising, mechanistic modernity. The emphasis on “audile-tactile” qualities as signals of cultural authenticity intersects with the cultural theories of Marshall McLuhan. Kroetsch’s subsequent “postmodernism,” like that of McLuhan, is a reactionary form of antimodernism. Beneath the experimental surface of Kroetsch’s later fictions, it is clear that he exhibits a preoccupation with rural life, and a desire to recapture the wholeness of societies as imagined prior to the existence of fragmenting technologies such as the printing press. These preoccupations are clearly present in a nascent form in Kroetsch’s early work *When Sick for Home*.

Kroetsch provides images of organic unity in this novel through a focus on orality, nature and mechanization, linking these concepts with contemporaneous ideas circulated by Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan’s theory, as expressed in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, is that contemporary society is in the process of recapturing the “wholeness” of the pre-modern era. McLuhan feels that the new electronic media will move modern humanity away from the “hot,” fragmented, visual culture to a “cool,” audile-tactile participatory culture. While there are clear parallels between Kroetsch and McLuhan, the younger writer Kroetsch expresses a much more conservative vision of the impact of technology on Canadian society, seeing it as entirely destructive of a rural, spoken culture that has preserved the positive aspects of orality beyond the time of Gutenberg. This concern with

² Note on parenthetical references from *When Sick for Home*: I have consistently used the University of Calgary library’s numbering system of folio pages (f) instead of the typed page numbers on the text. I have used the prefix “f” to avoid confusion.

modernization locates both McLuhan and Kroetsch within a tradition of antimodernism in North America that became prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century, when, as Lynda Jessup points out, antimodernism embraced “what was then a desire for the type of ‘authentic,’ immediate experience supposedly embodied in pre-industrial societies – in medieval communities or ‘Oriental’ cultures, in the Primitive, the Traditional, or the Folk” (“Antimodernism” 4). This tendency has continued to be manifested in cultural production throughout the twentieth century.

In *When Sick for Home*, Kroetsch reveals his craving for wholeness in the face of the fragmentation unleashed on society by modernization. This longing is clearly still present in his later, more experimental texts. *When Sick for Home* can be located within the parameters of what Lears calls antimodernism: a modernism that is a reactionary dismissal of modernity in favour of romantic nostalgia for a unified mind and body, often expressed through the idealization of the natural and the pastoral at the expense of technological advances, and a hyper-privileging of the oral. Not only are these aspects clearly present in this text but, as I go on to argue, they continue to inform Kroetsch’s fiction throughout his writing career. What critics such as Linda Hutcheon see as Kroetsch’s postmodernism is in fact a reaction against modernity, expressed through his preoccupation with recapturing an organic wholeness and authenticity of experience which is presumed to have predated the development in the Renaissance of what McLuhan has styled the Gutenberg era. Like Kroetsch’s subsequent fictions, *When Sick for Home* demonstrates his desire to piece together a humanity shattered and fragmented by a destructive modernity encapsulated by the technologies of print and electronic media.

When Sick for Home centres on a young man, Martin Lockner, who has returned to the small Alberta town of Coulee Hill following a lengthy sojourn in

eastern Canada. Martin had left home intending to become a Catholic priest, but decided against this choice on the seminary doorstep. Since rejecting the priesthood, he has spent several years as a casual labourer. Coming back for the wedding of his cousin Jeff to his own childhood sweetheart, Martin discovers that the wedding has been delayed by the death of his uncle, the groom's father. This postponement enables him to rekindle his affair with Kay, the bride-to-be. The novel concludes with the rescheduled marriage of Kay and Jeff, whereupon Martin leaves town for an unknown destination. Conservative motifs appearing in *When Sick for Home* recur throughout Kroetsch's later novels, including the rejection of mechanization, and fear of the impact of the modern technologies. The narrative privileges characters associated with orality and nature, such as the horse-breeder Louie Cormier (a precursor to Hazard Lepage in *The Studhorse Man*) and the farmer Jake Lang. These characters exhibit qualities which are linked to the highly valued concept of organic wholeness. In addition, Kroetsch decries the encroaching mechanization of the rural town, expressing a concern that this will divide humanity from the natural world.

Similar concerns are raised by McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published a year after Kroetsch completed *When Sick for Home*. Of particular significance is McLuhan's privileging of the quality of "tactility," which he suggests is "a kind of synesthesia or interplay among the senses" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 41). For McLuhan, tactility enables a participatory wholeness that contrasts with the fragmentation of the world which followed the development of the "high definition" visual bias of the Gutenberg era.³ McLuhan suggests that "the low definition of the tactile mode compels the viewer into an active participant role" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 41), and argues "our modern bias towards synesthesia and audile-tactile richness of experience" is a

³ "High definition" media, in McLuhan's theorizing, are those which rely on a single sense, while "low definition" media create their effects through composite sensory input (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 41-47).

turn away from the fragmented existence that followed the invention of the phonetic alphabet and the printing press (47). The qualities that McLuhan associates with the “audile-tactile” are those which connote a replete form of experience in tune with the unity of the natural world: “tactility is the mode of interplay and of being rather than of separation and of lineal sequence” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 240). McLuhan expresses his optimism that contemporary humanity can rekindle its sense of “interplay” – of wholeness – through a turn away from the “lineal sequence” of the print era towards electronic media which will allow the oral “audile-tactile” qualities which he values to be rediscovered. Far from being single-mindedly enthusiastic for all technological advances, McLuhan is therefore strongly opposed to mechanical inventions which include and are derived from the printing press. His endorsement of “low definition” electronic media such as television is rooted in his belief that these technologies will enable a return to the wholeness and organic unity of an oral culture predating the Gutenberg era existing from the Renaissance onwards.

McLuhan’s theory has been convincingly linked to his Catholic faith by Mark Krupnick, who associates his privileging of the oral with his religious beliefs, as inspired by the Catholic literary critic Father Walter J. Ong: “McLuhan is proclaiming a brilliant new age in which post-Gutenberg technology ushers in a futuristic electronic culture that will restore the oral, medieval Catholic world destroyed by visually fixated typographic literacy” (111). Although Robert Kroetsch was raised in the Catholic faith, it is not religion which prompts him to privilege oral, audile-tactile discourse, so much as his association of such aspects of non-written culture with his home region of Alberta. In *When Sick for Home*, Catholicism is associated primarily with the printed word in the form of the catechism book, which dictates the moral code that divides the protagonist Martin Lockner’s sexuality from his religious ideals.

It is through the regionally inflected orality of such characters as Louie Cormier and Jake Lang that Martin learns to reconcile these aspects, discovering a spiritual harmony of sex and nature in the realm of the pastoral.

In *When Sick for Home*, Kroetsch displays a focus on the “audile-tactile” similar to that of McLuhan. In personal correspondence quoted in a recent article by Russell Morton Brown, Kroetsch claims to have encountered McLuhan’s theories prior to the publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962: “In the late ’50s I took a course in myth at Breadloaf College one summer, and the instructor may have mentioned McLuhan even way back then” (“Robert Kroetsch” 139). In the same source Kroetsch reveals that he had “got hold of McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy* very soon after it was published – the early sixties I would guess” (139). While it is uncertain how much Kroetsch knew of McLuhan at the time when he was writing *When Sick for Home*, it is clear that Kroetsch’s text embarks on a critique of the technologies of modernity similar to that espoused by McLuhan, a reaction which is related to a lamentation for the mechanistic destruction evident throughout European and North American culture in the aftermath of World War II. In *When Sick for Home* Kroetsch writes an elegy for the organic unity of traditional rural life, which is represented as being under threat from modernization.

The idealization of rural life represents one strand of antimodernist discourse. An interrelated aspect is the mythologizing of pre-modern ways of life, epitomized by the middle ages.⁴ Both Kroetsch and McLuhan praise the works of the medieval writer Francois Rabelais as texts that represent the integration of earthy and tactile elements into written discourse. For McLuhan, Rabelais is “a man on the frontier between cultures,” the medieval audile-tactile world and the visual world of the post-

⁴ Medievalism was a prominent feature of antimodernist discourse in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American thought, as discussed in detail by Lears (142-81).

Gutenberg Renaissance (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 149). McLuhan argues that by writing in a style that consciously emphasizes the senses of touching, feeling, tasting, and hearing, Rabelais deliberately contests the fragmented, sequential orderliness of the Gutenberg world with its high-definition emphasis on visuality. In doing so, Rabelais recaptures the sensory interplay of McLuhan's idealized middle ages: "This extreme tactility in him advertises his medievalism by consciously splattering it against tidy [sic] new visual wall of print culture" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 149-50). McLuhan suggests that Rabelais's medieval sensory bias against the visual culture that exists after Gutenberg is a significant factor in his style of writing: "It is in this tactile and audile, and ever so unliterary mode that Rabelais gets his naughty, 'earthy' effects" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 150). McLuhan's idealisation of the middle ages is a continuation of a *fin-de-siècle* fascination with medieval people, who were believed to have exhibited traits of "fierce conviction, physical and emotional vitality, playfulness and spontaneity, an ability to cultivate fantastic or dreamlike states of awareness, [and] an intense otherworldly asceticism" that were being lost from a rapidly modernizing world (Lears 142). In his enthusiasm for the work of Rabelais, McLuhan reiterates the emphasis on emotional and physical intensity in particular. He stresses that he considers sensory integration to be a desirable attribute of any writer, in that it provides a means to overcome the visual bias that he associates with print culture.

When Sick for Home demonstrates Kroetsch's Rabelaisian preoccupation with the "earthiness" of the world, an audile-tactile focus that indicates his desire to capture in print the sensations that usually escape being recorded in print form, including vomiting, excretion and urination. As a child, acting as altar server at a funeral, Martin experiences the gulf between his lofty aspirations of spirituality and the audile-tactile aspects of the natural world when a dog begins to rub itself against

his ankles at the graveside: “For the first time that morning he prayed. My God, don’t let him cock a leg, don’t sweet glorious heaven let him piss all over my new blue Fleet Foot running shoes” (f16). Martin wonders at the contrast between his desire to surpass the limitations of his body through religion and the reality of his body odour, despairingly asking God, “is life nothing but sock changing” (f16). The witty juxtaposition of God and dog emphasizes the repression of the natural by religious beliefs.

Martin’s bodily functions continue to interfere with his religious obligations. As prayers are being said at his uncle Jake’s wake, Martin is overwhelmed by the hangover that he is trying to suppress, rushing outside: “At first he tried to conceal the noise of his retching, but he gave up and roared out his guttural and belly-deep release” (f45). An obsessive focus on the body continues to be evident: “When he finally straightened and wiped his eyes and buried his hands in his pockets he found his penis, shrivelled and cold, and he gave it a reassuring tug. He felt better. He broke wind” (f45). “Earthy” bodily functions interconnect with rural oral culture, as Martin is interrupted mid-urination by a local man who tells the joke, “Ever hear the one [...] about the guy that went crazy in a round barn?” – “Couldn’t find a corner to pee in” (f50). Other episodes in the novel reveal a fascination with excretion, including an anecdote that Martin tells Kay about a friend who took his girlfriend to Mexico only for her to suffer from diarrhoea (f126), which is retold and elaborated upon later in the novel (f189). At another point, Martin is covered in excrement while attempting to rescue his friend Louie who has been injured by a stallion: “He [Martin] scraped the side of his face in mud and manure” (f176). This manure is subsequently trampled by Martin over his mother’s freshly cleaned floor, much to her disgust – an interesting correlation with McLuhan’s assertion that Rabelais’s audile-tactile medievalism is

spattered over the “tidy wall” of post-Gutenberg print culture. It is significant that the sexually-repressed Mrs. Lockner embodies the values codified in the book of catechism which tears Martin between his erotic desires and his Catholic religion.⁵

Neil Randall has emphasized elements of Kroetsch’s earthy qualities in later texts such as *The Studhorse Man* and *What the Crow Said*, suggesting that these elements are related to his knowledge of Bakhtin’s work on Rabelais. However, my archival research makes clear that these elements were in place in *When Sick for Home*, the unpublished text written in 1961, several years before the translation of *Rabelais and his World* into English in 1965. In conversations published in *Labyrinths of Voice*, and in the essay “Carnival and Violence: a Meditation,” Kroetsch demonstrates his subsequent familiarity with Bakhtin’s text, which may indeed have influenced his later writing. That being said, it is clear that Kroetsch already embarks on a similar project in *When Sick for Home*, many years prior to the discovery of Bakhtin by the West. This indicates not the influence of Bakhtin, but rather a nostalgia for a pre-modern rural environment, a craving for the imagined integrated wholeness of a sensory life before religion, science and rationalism split the senses from each other, dividing mind and body in the process. This idea can be linked usefully to McLuhan’s concept of “synesthesia” or “interplay among the senses” which he argues can counter the “fission of the senses” that occurred following the time of Gutenberg (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 41, 54). What Kroetsch later deems “carnivaliazion” is therefore an adoption of a literary neologism which he defines in a way that establishes his own writings as primary examples of this newly

⁵ Martin learns that his mother has been punishing his grandmother for years because she has discovered that her eldest brother had been conceived out of wedlock: upon discovering this family secret, Martin’s mother “had a conniption fit” and started going to church on a daily basis. Martin’s grandmother explains the family history: “She said I was sinful. Her own mother. And the dishes she left me. And the beds to make” (f63). This is also the point when Martin’s mother “started praying for one of her sons to be a priest” (f63).

valorized rejection of modernity, as is made apparent in the 1983 essay “Carnival and Violence: a Meditation.” Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque therefore gives Kroetsch a language to express what he was already doing, as well as providing a legitimating discourse which carries authority within literary culture.

In “Carnival and Violence,” Kroetsch summarizes Bakhtin, suggesting that “For him [...] carnivalization produced the greatness of Cervantes and Rabelais and Shakespeare, then, by the middle of the 17th century went into serious decline, into, by the 19th century, almost total eclipse” (“Carnival and Violence” 111-2). Where Bakhtin feels that literature recovers some carnivalesque elements in the novels of Dostoevsky, Joyce, Kafka and Proust, Kroetsch offers an alternative history of the carnivalesque focusing on American and Canadian writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Thomas Haliburton, Mark Twain and Herman Melville. In doing so, Kroetsch establishes a carnivalesque North American canon in which he also includes his own novel *The Words of My Roaring*: “But I must end by speaking out against the authority of Bakhtin himself. I grew up in a rural part of Western Canada, where a trace of carnival, if not the carnivalization of literature, was vital and alive. We measured time by wedding dances and sports days and rodeos” (“Carnival and Violence” 120). By creating an alternative history of the novel which focuses on the continuation of carnival in North America during a time when it is being eclipsed and then rediscovered in Europe, Kroetsch indicates a territorial cultural superiority: the inhabitants of the old world of Europe were so controlled by authority that they were ultimately denied the disruptive potentiality of carnival, although it survived in the colonies. In effect, according to this reading of literary history, North American writers have successfully retained a medieval authenticity of carnivalesque oral culture, while nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers in Europe can only aim

towards rediscovering a tradition lost to them during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

For Kroetsch, an emphasis on the “carnavalesque” is one of the defining features of postmodernist writing. Under the auspices of his conservative vision, Kroetsch bestows North America with the honour of being both more culturally authentic *and* more up-to-date than Western Europe. His focus on orality enables him to construct a new version of literary history highlighting the cultural superiority of the “new world,” by paradoxically emphasizing its removal from the metropolitan centres where print culture became dominant. In doing so he partakes in an antimodern fantasy that negates both the history of publishing and urbanism in North America. This manoeuvre moves rural culture from the margins to the centre, emphasizing the importance of American and Canadian pastoral orality. The antimodern nature of Kroetsch’s ostensible postmodernism indicates the strong currents of cultural nationalism underlying his critical project. Not only is he building a canon, but he is implying that his literary tradition is superior to that of the “old world” cultures which he connects with the technological progress represented by the modernization and urbanization of European societies. According to Kroetsch, carnival lays bare the illusion of completeness desired by authority figures, going so far as to claim that “Perhaps North American culture itself became a kind of carnivalesque response to the ‘authority’ of European cultures and European versions of history” (“Carnival and Violence” 118).

Although Kroetsch cites Bakhtin’s argument that “Carnival was [...] hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin quoted in “Carnival and Violence” 111), in actuality he uses “carnival” as a way to express wholeness and authenticity, and to create – or to recreate – a culture where “everyone is an active participant,

everyone communes in the carnival act [...] its participants *live* in it” (Bakhtin quoted in “Carnival and Violence” 113). While Kroetsch suggests that what he values about carnival is its incompleteness, its emphasis on “a state of becoming, not of being” (“Carnival and Violence” 118), what actually comes to the foreground is that Kroetsch is privileging the potential of carnival to create a full and participatory wholeness of being: one which is not deceived by the *false* completeness that is used by authorities to justify their control. Furthermore, Kroetsch utilizes a “new world/old world” binary opposition in which the former element becomes privileged. Once again, Kroetsch uses a seemingly radical literary concept – carnivalization – to bestow a contemporary literary cachet upon writers he values (including himself, as a lengthy quotation from *The Words of My Roaring* indicates), in a manoeuvre that disguises the conservative reaction against modernity that underpins his critical writing.

Kroetsch adopts Bakhtin’s vocabulary of “carnival” to authorize his own underlying antimodernism. In “Carnival and Violence” he praises the writing of Roch Carrier, a contemporary Quebec writer, for the elements of carnival in his novel *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* (1968, trans. 1970): Carrier’s “snow-bound village becomes the embodiment of a carnival that recalls Bakhtin – or Breughel” (“Carnival and Violence” 120). The Breughelistic emphasis on drinking, eating, and excretion in the early, unpublished novel *When Sick for Home* indicates that, long before his exposure to Bakhtin’s work, Kroetsch is preoccupied with elements that will subsequently become known as the carnivalesque. In particular the audile-tactile sensory input in the early novel, and its privileging of orality over the printed word, is an indication of an antimodernist tendency in Kroetsch’s work, which in effect attempts to recapture the integration of mind, body and senses which McLuhan and Bakhtin associate with the pre-modern era represented by the middle ages.

Carnival intersects with orality in *When Sick for Home* as well as Kroetsch's subsequent fictions. In his later elaborations of carnival in "Carnival and Violence," Kroetsch states that "In the use of folk speech itself, language from the oral tradition in which the carnivalesque survived, Haliburton and Melville and Twain found a way to issue their carnivalistic challenges to the official codes, the official laws" ("Carnival and Violence" 117). It is clear from this extract that Kroetsch associates "folk speech" with "carnival," seeing it as a way of violating "official codes" and "official laws." The term "folk" is, of course, deeply implicated in the tradition of antimodernism.⁶ In his adulation of oral culture, Kroetsch expresses a similar attitude to that of McLuhan, who associates codified written systems with the splintering and fragmentation of the Gutenberg Galaxy. For both Kroetsch and McLuhan, the audile-tactile has always resisted the Gutenberg systems. Furthermore, both authors suggest that it is possible to maintain the existence of positive attributes associated with oral culture even after the encroachment of print culture, if writers choose to focus on the audile-tactile sensations.

In *When Sick for Home*, there is ample evidence of Kroetsch's preoccupation with the oral and "folk speech." Orality is a dominant theme in the novel. Men such as Louie Cormier and Martin's uncle Jake are "oral" men, in touch with nature and everything that is happening in the town. Jake in particular epitomizes the town's oral culture. He attends church primarily as a social occasion, swapping stories in the basement prior to mass: "Uncle Jake, especially, had had his moments here, for sitting

⁶ Once again, there are clear parallels between Kroetsch's "postmodern" late twentieth century attitudes, and those of early twentieth century Canadians. Gerta Moray points out that antimodern Canadian thought and culture at this time often expressed "a yearning to recover bonds with nature threatened by urban industrial society and a cult of idealized images of 'the Folk' [...] who were imagined as living in creative harmony with a land that was uncorrupted by the modern industrial world" ("Emily Carr" 81). Similar ideas are clearly present in Kroetsch's idealization of rural "folk speech."

in the beer parlor six days a week, he was most likely to have heard some new jokes since last Saturday..." (f89). Jake lives his life without electric lighting or a telephone, living a life attuned to both sensory interplay and natural temporal rhythms: "Go to bed with the sun, he advised. And let a man look you in the eye when he does his explaining" (f48).⁷ Having achieved substantial success as a landowner early in his career, Jake spends the rest of his days maintaining his position by augmenting his knowledge as he sits "in the beer parlor of the Coulee Hill Hotel, sipping a glass of beer that someone else had usually paid for, or he [sits] playing cards in the lobby, watching, waiting, scheming" (f46-47). He does not need technology to supplement his all-encompassing awareness of opportunities, as he is hotwired into the oral network of the community.

Jake Lang becomes a successful farmer by respecting the importance of oral communication. The local studhorse man Louie Cormier, whom the protagonist Martin Lockner regards as his closest friend in the town, is also closely associated with modes of audile-tactile oral culture. Martin recalls accompanying Louie on his cart, remembering that "with Louie he listened, talked, felt" (f172). Louie's connection with orality is signalled in the novel's opening sequence, set in the town's graveyard, when he tells horror stories about people buried alive, including a tale that had been passed to him by Martin's grandmother: "One night when I was travelling my studhorse I stopped overnight at the hotel and she told me about opening another coffin [...] The corpse was turned over on its stomach as if to try and lift something" (f9). Louie is often found in the town's beer parlor, where Martin's grandmother also

⁷ As discussed in the introduction, Kim Sawchuck draws attention to the expression in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century antimodernism of "the desire for a return to a perceived historical moment in time when the sense of time accommodated the rhythms of the body, the movements of the sun, the rotation of the earth, and the passing of the seasons" (161). The death of Jake Lang in *When Sick for Home* evokes the idea that this natural sense of time is in danger of being lost in rural Alberta communities.

tells stories, including a tall tale about playing cards with the devil on the night of her son Jake's wake (f200). To Kroetsch, prairie pubs and beer parlors are repositories of an oral culture, in particular what he has deemed the "tall-tale tradition" in an interview with Margaret Laurence (55). Elsewhere Kroetsch has commented on the aural-oral ambiance of beer parlors, which overcomes the visual bias prevalent in modern society: "To look at the interior of a prairie pub is merely a pleasure; to listen is to recover our story, to dwell at the *centre* again" ("The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues" 17, emphasis added). Kroetsch's preoccupation with prairie drinking spots is related to their association with the audile-tactile qualities of an oral culture, and therefore their ability to mend what he sees as the wounds inflicted by a fragmenting modernity, as made evident by the references to the concepts of recovery and centrality in this quotation. Once again, Kroetsch's desire to conserve rural culture is connected with the antimodernism which underscores his version of postmodernism.⁸

In this early novel, Kroetsch suggests that the oral culture of Alberta is potentially threatened by new technologies. While Marshall McLuhan's conservatism leads him to endorse the new "cool" electronic media that he feels will allow for a resurgence of the oral, enabling the fragmented Gutenberg man to be put back together again, in *When Sick for Home* Kroetsch is more reactionary in his indication that electronic media are agents of corruption. Kroetsch's reaction against modern technology as a threat to oral culture is demonstrated through the character of Alex McKinnon. In sharp contrast with Jake Lang and Louie Cormier, MacKinnon, a seller of farm machinery, is strongly associated with the mechanization of rural Alberta, and

⁸ Kroetsch's antimodern construction of postmodernism is by no means unusual. Among the qualities associated with postmodernism in Ihab Hassan's early discussion of the term in "POSTmodernISM" are a reaction against urbanism and technologism and the desire for the recovery of nature, although Hassan does point out that these tendencies are by no means definitive, as he also suggests that within postmodernism exists a tension between "Futurists and Technophiles vs. Arcadians and Luddites" (54).

the destruction of the traditional ways of life during the period of the mid-1950s when the novel is set. At the end of the novel it is revealed that a TV station is opening in the city – presumably Edmonton – and that MacKinnon is “taking on a dealership”: “I’ll have a set in every living room in this country inside of six months – Kee-rist” (f207). Kroetsch issues a warning about the fragmentary potential of new media through the character of Martin’s Uncle Norbie. Norbie has begun to ignore the real people around him because he is obsessed with his radio. As Martin explains to Kay, Norbie doesn’t understand the languages that he listens to, “But now and then a word tells him he’s listening to Mexico City or to Paris or Rome, and he’ll listen until he has to work,” because “He has a way of getting along with mother and Grandma. He pretends they don’t exist” (f125). In contrast with the segmented, fragmented modernized men such as Norbie and Alex MacKinnon, men such as Louie Cormier and Martin’s uncle Jake achieve heightened significance as examples of what McLuhan has called “integral” men (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 212), fully in touch with oral culture and the natural environment. It is significant that one of MacKinnon’s desires is to put a TV in the lobby of the hotel, the place where Jake Lang had cultivated his oral network: this is clearly an indication that the local culture is under threat from the new technology of television, with the danger of its patrons becoming passive viewers instead of talking to each other.

The focus on orality is an important aspect of the text. Unlike McLuhan, who sees television as a participatory “cool” medium and therefore celebrates the potential for it to enable the unification of the senses once again, Kroetsch indicates that he feels that the coming of television will strip rural Alberta culture of its oral character. In this respect the novel is an elegiac response to the potential destruction of a facet of Alberta life that Kroetsch values. Later, in his critical writing, Kroetsch will go on to

claim that prairie people are resistant to the dominance of print and electronic media: “The great sub-text of prairie literature is our oral tradition. In the face of books, magazines, films, and TV programs that are so often someone else, we talk to each other by, literally, talking” (“The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues” [*Lovely Treachery of Words* version] 6).⁹ In his use of the term “tradition” Kroetsch’s conservatism is apparent: he desires to establish a prairie paradigm that will allow him to locate himself and other writers within an established culture. Although the prairies lack the same kind of literary resources as are available in, for example, European nations, the scarcity of written texts becomes a blessing rather than a hindrance, as Kroetsch suggests that the traditional basis of prairie literature is oral culture.

Kroetsch’s version of postmodernism is a reactionary antimodernism. What appears in his criticism to be a condemnation of tradition and canon is actually specifically targeted at the traditions of European print culture. Kroetsch attacks these cultural metanarratives forcefully, but installs his own set of cultural paradigms which privilege North American – and, more specifically, Western Canadian – oral discourses. Rather than dispensing with the idea of tradition, Kroetsch reconfigures it as the desire to return to the authenticity of the realm of the spoken word. In putting forth this argument, Kroetsch implies that prairie writing taps into the organic, unified experience of oral culture, which has managed to bypass the Gutenberg era, preserving spoken tradition on the Great Plains. By claiming to draw influence from orality, rather than the written word, Kroetsch emphasizes what he sees as the cultural superiority of the prairies: indeed, the very ‘backwardness’ of a culture which lacks written literature becomes a beacon of its superiority, in that Canada’s prairie people are among the few who have not been seduced by print culture. In making this case,

⁹ While the “someone else” referred to here may be the United States, Kroetsch may also be referring to the idea that culture and media production tends to be focussed in the urban environment as opposed to rural.

Kroetsch also participates in discourses of cultural nationalism, which tend to deny or minimize the sense of exterior literary influence: this perspective is problematized by the intertextuality of Canadian literature, prairie or otherwise.

Kroetsch explicitly links his region and oral culture, emphasizing that “the predominance of the beer parlour and the church,” stampedes and country-dances in prairie fiction draw attention to the importance of orality, these being “those places where we talk ourselves into existence” (“The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues” [*Lovely Treachery of Words* version] 6). It is notable that his tune has changed, as this essay signals his move away from the early, elegiac response to prairie oral culture in *When Sick for Home* towards a celebratory stance that rejoices in its continued existence in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is significant that, during the period spanning the writing of these two texts, Kroetsch is party to both an upsurge in Western Canadian regional pride emerging from John Diefenbaker’s premiership (1957-63) and also the crystallization of Canadian nationalism surrounding the Centennial celebrations of 1967.¹⁰ Kroetsch’s regional identity correlates with his cultural nationalism as he comes to see the Western provinces as paradigmatically Canadian, exemplified by a cultural orality which becomes a metaphor for resistance to external influence. In an interview with Russell Brown

¹⁰ While Kroetsch was based in the United States from 1956 to 1978, he continued to visit Canada frequently during this period. Among his visits are a trip to the Mackenzie to research *But We Are Exiles* in 1962 (Lecker, *Robert Kroetsch* n.p.), travels throughout his home province in the mid-1960s while researching his travel book *Alberta*, stays in Edmonton and Toronto in late 1969 (Letter to Morton L. Ross), a visit the Red Deer river to research *Badlands* in 1972 (“Towards an Essay”), book readings in Edmonton and Toronto in 1973 (Letters to William Spanos), a trip to Lethbridge in 1974 (*Crow Journals* 17), several weeks spent at the summer school for the arts in Qu’Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan from 1974-1976 (*Crow Journals*), and a period as writer-in-residence at the University of Lethbridge in 1976-77. Kroetsch returned to teach in Canada permanently in 1978. Therefore, although Kroetsch was living outside Canada during this period, he maintained a strong connection with his home country through travel, and also through correspondence with friends and family who continued to live there. In “Towards an Essay” he comments on the impact of a 1974 postal strike: “No mail from Canada for days, because of the mail strike. A curious sense of being cut off from my sources” (149). Clearly, when the postal service was operating normally, Kroetsch did not feel any sense of isolation from his Canadian sources, indicating his sense of connection in spite of geographical distance.

conducted in the early 1970s, Kroetsch has indicated that being away from Canada has heightened his awareness of the “Canadian voice”: “I suspect that living outside of Canada as I have has given me a kind of distance that has helped [...] [that] sense of language, what I might call Canadian language, which is one thing that intrigues me – the Canadian voice if you will – that sense has been sharpened, I believe, by my living ‘outside’ and hearing that voice within the context of other voices” (9-10). Once again, Kroetsch’s choice of terminology highlights his privileging of the concept of orality in his construction of cultural distinctiveness.

Parallels can clearly be established between Kroetsch’s privileging of the oral and McLuhan’s favouring of the “audile-tactile” over visual print culture. In *When Sick for Home* Kroetsch demonstrates a preoccupation with issues relating to writing and media that will continue to reverberate throughout his fictional output. He contrasts the “reductive” media of the phonetic alphabet and the photograph with the expansive inclusiveness of oral culture. For Kroetsch, photographs are deceptive: “Frozen out of time. A baby picture – buck naked on a blanket and hair curled. A graduation photo – Coulee Hill High School, 1941. A wedding picture. A family picture. A baby picture again, the face vaguely familiar. The old cycle, made timeless by the blind exclusion of death” (f67). The most damning aspect of photography, from Kroetsch’s point of view, is its permanence and immutability, an attitude that he shares with McLuhan, who writes of the photograph’s ability to “isolate single moments in time” (*Understanding Media* 188). In *Labyrinths of Voice*, Kroetsch talks about photography with Neuman and Wilson. He links the concept of the photograph with the idea of stasis, remarking that “The photograph is almost grotesque in its ellipsis or its brevity... even in its kind of summary” (*Labyrinths* 128). While in *When Sick for Home* Kroetsch castigates the family snapshots for their reductive nature, he

also attacks the brevity of the inscriptions on gravestones at the local cemetery: “Tho Lost to Sight to Memory Dear,” “Lest We Forget,” “Too Good for Earth God Called Her Home,” and “When the Morning Dawns We Will Meet Again.” Martin Lockner sees all these inscriptions as “The tag lines that squandered human love” (f27). In this novel it is clear that Kroetsch values the spoken word as an expansive retort to the fragmentary “ellipsis” of photography and the written word.

In *When Sick for Home*, Kroetsch reveals his nostalgia for a more whole, less fragmented world such as the idealized version of Alberta represented by the oral culture of Louie Cormier, Jake and Grandmother Lang. Paralleling Kroetsch’s longing for the continuation of prairie orality is his distaste for the mechanization which threatens the traditional earthy, “tactile” relationship between humanity and nature. Kroetsch loads the text in favour of the natural and pastoral through connecting the most sympathetic qualities and characters with idealized rural ways of life. The figure most closely associated with nature is Louie Cormier:

He and the studhorse man had been allies since Martin was a boy; since Martin rode along in the two-wheeled cart, pulled by an old mare and leading a stud [...] He drank too much, and when drunk he preached his hard-shell atheism to a beer parlor full of smiling believers. Yet from him Martin learned the mystery and beauty and also of the terror of things like spring and lust. (f24-25)

Louie’s choice of residence, at the edge of the river valley, emphasises his position as a link between the cultivation of the prairie homesteads and the uncultivated natural landscape that surround them: “To Martin, as a boy growing up on the parklands, the valley had been the forbidden edge of the world. The flat, predictable plain crumbled away suddenly to confusion and chaos. A few yards

beyond Louie's house the plain broke; the land of almost rolling wheatfields and poplar groves was gone" (f117). In this section, Kroetsch demonstrates a certain ambivalence about the cultivation of Alberta's land. Although the farmed landscape is usually associated with pastoral idyll for Kroetsch, at this point in *When Sick for Home* cultivated land appears to signify the modernization of the rural environment. Throughout Kroetsch's later fiction, he emphasizes his sense that even farmed rural landscapes stand in opposition to modernity. A contrasting attitude is that of Rod Bantjes, who compares prairie wheatfields to Mondrian's modernist grids ("Modernism" 123). By placing Louie's home at the edge of the cultivated environment, in this early text Kroetsch suggests that farms are a form of modernization in their own right. This sentiment does not continue into his subsequent novels, where the rural environment is portrayed as a premodern antithesis to the modernized environment. His early ambivalence gives way to a clear-cut binary opposition of modern (= urban) versus non-modern (= rural), in which the latter term is privileged.

One particularly significant aspect of the valley at the edge of Louie's property is its connection with oral culture. This valley is a rich imaginative source for the children of Coulee Hill. For example, there was "the rumour of bears prowling among the saskatoon bushes," "stories of lynx that follow a man in the dark and leap on him from a tree or ledge," and "Stories of a monster that swam up the river" (f117). There are echoes of Robert Service's ballads in the tale of "a lump of gold so big a man couldn't lift it; the man who found it concealed it, and when he got help and went back he couldn't find it again" (f117-118).¹¹ Kroetsch's descriptions cement the link between the valley and oral culture: "There were damp deserted coalmines

¹¹ Kroetsch goes on to make extensive use of Service's works as source materials in his most recent novel *The Man from the Creeks*.

that echoed when you yelled into their silent mouths” (f117). The valley is clearly constructed as an audile-tactile environment. Louie’s proximity to this valorized place associates him with Kroetsch’s romantic nostalgia for an oral culture which he sees as being inextricably linked to – and indeed recoverable through – the natural world. It is significant that the affair between Kay and Martin begins to take shape at Louie’s farm and in the valley beside it. Kay and Martin engage in horseplay in the snow, tumbling down into the valley, where they kiss (f122-123). The valley, as repository of the natural, is an environment where repressed sexual impulses come to the surface. In these instances, Kroetsch blends a regionalist focus on landscape with a romantic preoccupation with nature. Certainly, in this early text Kroetsch looks to the past rather than embracing the future. Despite his subsequent adoption of postmodernist techniques, at the heart of Kroetsch’s enterprise is the desire to recapture an oral, pre-technological authenticity of experience, contributing to the tradition of Canadian antimodernism.

In *When Sick for Home*, Kroetsch’s idealization of the possibility of interaction between humanity and the rural environment is embodied in the studhorse man Louie Cormier. After Louie’s death Martin remembers the close association he has made between his friend and nature:

I rode with him. A meadowlark singing on a telephone pole. He heard it first. On a chilly clear bright morning with the sharp lovely wind bringing tears to your eyes. And the hoarfrost still on the grass [...] And the plop of a muskrat into a full ditch, and we’d watch, and then he’d spot the nose arrowing in the green slime. And snipes running on the mud. And a killdeer swishing overhead with its killdeer killdeer call. Plaintive and high. And fat ducks

stitching across a slough. And a blue heron, one morning, standing on one leg.

(f180-1)

It is notable that this passage demonstrates Kroetsch's emphasis on audile-tactile qualities in conjunction with visual images, cementing the impression that the natural world is a complete sensory environment. Respect for nature has an ethical imperative as well. When Martin shoots and kills a crow for a thrill as a child, Louie tells him about "the nesting and flight, nesting and flight, the leaving of everything behind and then the accumulation again, twig by twig, string by string, speck of mud by speck of mud" (f182). In his description of Louie's connection with the natural environment, Kroetsch evokes a sense of "biocentrism" or "ecocentrism," "the attempt to view the world from a nonhuman perspective, to see it from the perspective of the biotic community" (Ian Marshall 196). The wealth of natural imagery – both audile and visual – reinforces the sense that Louie is Kroetsch's idealized representation of an integral man, at one with nature and his environment. Again, Kroetsch intertwines the concepts of orality and nature as Martin learns about natural history through his conversations with Louie.

Louie's status as studhorse man also inspires the early sexual activity of Kay and Martin. After having witnessed Louie's stallion mounting mares: "somehow from the mystery of that neighing beast [...] they had derived a children's game. With the impudence of children they called it 'playing studhorse'" (f43). Embedded in a narrative that privileges the natural world, it is clear that Kroetsch's treatment of Martin and Kay's early sexual experimentation is sympathetic. Subsequently, Martin and Kay learn at catechism class that "what they were doing was called a mortal sin" (f43). It is telling that it is through the medium of the printed word that they learn of their transgressions, reading about sin in a "glossy new book" – the adjectives

highlight its artificiality – promising “eternal damnation and the unbearable agony of hell” (f43). In *When Sick for Home*, a text that barely mentions the written word, it is significant that it is a book which divides Kay and Martin from their natural desires. Kroetsch articulates his belief that the terminating of their sexual encounters is something to be mourned, representing as it does the separation of instinctive nature from repressive culture. This separation is paralleled by the division between orality and the written word. Once again, Kroetsch connects an idyllic, unified organic state of being with receptiveness to the natural world, clearly signalling his antimodernism.

Paralleled with the repression of sexuality by religion via the medium of the printed word is the subjugation of nature by encroaching mechanization. Both these aspects of modern culture are equally castigated in *When Sick for Home*. Similar ideas can be found in the writings of Marshall McLuhan, who has linked the separation or fragmentation of the senses to mechanization, stating that “the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves [...] The restructuring of human work and association was shaped by the technique of fragmentation that is the essence of machine technology” (*Understanding Media* 7-8). For McLuhan, the archetypal machine is the printing press, as “Mechanization of any process is achieved by fragmentation, beginning with the mechanization of writing by moveable types” (*Understanding Media* 348). The invention of the machine, McLuhan suggests, is a pivotal moment in human history. By associating mechanical technological advances with a split in the unified sensory wholeness of humanity, McLuhan – like Kroetsch – reveals his antimodernist desire for the organic unity of an oral, audile-tactile world.

Concerns similar to those of McLuhan are evident in *When Sick for Home*. Through Martin Lockner, Kroetsch critiques the modernization and mechanization of Alberta. By aligning himself with the outdated figure of the studhorse man Louie

Cormier, Martin is able to reconcile his body and mind in an idealized, pre-mechanical pastoral environment. Even Martin's personal appearance is connected with the plant world, as his hair is described as being "the color of a wheatfield" (f19). Martin is a paradigmatic Gutenberg man (he is the town's most renowned scholar) seeking to overcome his fragmented modern existence through the integration of his mind and body with the environment that surrounds him. He takes it upon himself to keep up the work on Jake Lang's homestead after his death: "It became for Martin a pleasure to work alone on the isolated farm. He had never been quite so solitary in his life. But it wasn't a frightening solitude" (f92). In this pastoral idyll, Martin is joined by magpies and chickadees as he does his chores. He notices "the one-one-two tracks of rabbits," and "hear[s] with excitement the howling of coyotes" (f92). The rejection of mechanization is indicative of Kroetsch's nostalgia for simpler times, as he describes Martin moving into a bunkhouse left abandoned by "the last threshing crew," "the last gang of men to live here before the combine replaced them" (f93). Later farm machinery is described in loaded terms that highlight its ugly artificiality: "[Martin] crossed another intersection, walking past a vacant lot full of the grotesque shapes of green and red farm machines with bright yellow wheels – a self-propelled combine, a power auger, a straw bailer, two tillers, three tractors" (f145). It is clear from *When Sick for Home* that Kroetsch is concerned about the separation of humanity from the organic unity of the natural world, signalled by his focus on the negative impact of mechanical technologies upon traditional rural culture.

Martin enjoys physical contact with the earth, and likes to get his hands dirty. Like Dorf in the later novel *Alibi*, he is "muddily human" (*Alibi* 172). In the swine-butcher scene discussed earlier, Alex MacKinnon, the novel's avatar of new

technology, initially attempts to shoot the pig, using a mechanized and distancing method of butchering. It is noteworthy that Martin successfully slays the animal with a knife in the traditional manner (f110-111). This “hands-on” approach to butchery is more in tune with ideas of organic integration than the mechanized, industrial-scale slaughtering that takes place at such sites as the stockyards where a crucial sequence in *The Studhorse Man* takes place. In that novel, Kroetsch continues his critique of modernity, lamenting the passing of the traditional rural lifestyle that has necessitated the widespread destruction of horses.

Martin achieves a sense of organic wholeness through his interaction with nature, which mends the split between his senses. It is in this rural atmosphere that Martin is able to resume his love affair with Kay McKinnon. Their relationship is very much tied up with the pastoral idyll of farm life:

Sometimes Martin left his chores until she arrived and they would go around together with the lantern, watering and feeding the horses and tending to the cattle and the pigs. They would go to the bunkshack and sometimes Kay would have refused to eat at home, and would prepare a full supper. They would share a bottle of Calgary or Lethbridge beer and eat a simple meal; then they would do the dishes and retire to the bunk. (f142)

The use of this imagery is deeply connected with Kroetsch’s romantic antimodernism. His fear of the impact of mechanization, and his idealization of the natural and pastoral, place him in a continuum with the Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. McLuhan has argued that “our fascination with all phases of the unconscious, personal and collective, as with all modes of primitive awareness, began in the eighteenth century with the first violent revulsion against print culture and mechanical industry” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 31) – what he calls “a ‘Romantic reaction’

towards organic wholeness” (31). By establishing parallels between his own theories and those of the Romantics, McLuhan highlights his participation in a tradition of antimodernist thought. As well as its focus on natural and pastoral imagery, Romanticism was concerned with recreating the ambiance of medieval ballads and pre-modern folk tales in order to move away from the ordered, sequential and fragmented Gutenberg world. In particular, Kroetsch’s use of irrational elements, including the ghost stories that form part of *When Sick for Home* and the Germanic folk legends of poltergeists which appear in *The Studhorse Man*, aligns him with this particular strand of literature. By using these *oral* tales, Kroetsch seeks to tap into the resources of an idealized pre-modern era predating the fragmentation resulting from the wide scale adoption of print culture.

In the twentieth century, Romantic antimodernism can be seen to continue in the modernism of T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and even James Joyce. *When Sick for Home* exists within this tradition of antimodernism. Kroetsch has of course consciously associated himself with Romanticism in his choice of the novel’s title and epigraph, which are taken from Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.”¹² Kroetsch’s selection of Keats’s poem as epigraph and source of the title for his work of fiction emphasizes the importance of ideas of nature and the pastoral in the text.

Furthermore, as Gérard Genette points out, cultural prestige is bestowed on the later work and its writer through the association thus established by its author (147).¹³

¹² The lines that comprise the epigraph are, “Perhaps the self-same song that found a path / Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears among the alien corn.”

¹³ The quotation title of *When Sick for Home* was changed to *Coulee Hill* in a copy of the manuscript dating from Kroetsch’s increasingly desperate attempts to publish the novel prior to the acceptance of *But We Are Exiles*, but what might be construed as a rejection of prior literary influence in favour of a locally-inspired title is complicated by the fact that several of Kroetsch’s subsequent novels have quotation titles. *But We Are Exiles* refers to “The Canadian Boat Song”; *The Words of My Roaring* takes its title from Psalm 22; and *The Man from the Creeks* is from Robert Service’s poem “The Shooting of Dan McGrew.” Interestingly in the case of the last novel, Kroetsch is in a position to bestow his own “Canadian Postmodern” prestige onto the popular verse of Service, thus Kroetsch brings the earlier writer back into the canon of Canadian literature.

Although Kroetsch's evocation of romantic antimodernism is perhaps not signalled so obviously in his subsequent works of fiction, even in these more overtly experimental texts he continues to reiterate a longing for organic unity expressed through an idealization of the rural environment.

One modernist writer whose influence is evident in *When Sick for Home* is James Joyce, whose use of the stream of consciousness is also admired by McLuhan.¹⁴ Joyce's writing gestures towards the wholeness of the world prior to modern fragmentation. His version of modernism is in part derived from such thinkers as John Ruskin, who was associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the British Arts and Crafts movement,¹⁵ and whose aesthetic theories are articulated by Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist*.¹⁶ It has also been established that Joyce had great awareness of the works of Rabelais, the author whom McLuhan associates with the desire to recapture the audile-tactile realm under threat from the modernization represented by print culture.¹⁷

Joyce's influence on Kroetsch at this early point of his career is highly apparent in *When Sick for Home*. The image of a rat in a ditch from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* ("And a fellow had once seen a big rat jump plop into the scum" [14]) is echoed in Kroetsch's phrase "And the plop of a muskrat into a full ditch" (f181). *When Sick for Home* focuses on the Joycean subject matter of a young man who wants to be a priest but cannot renounce sexual desire. There are several instances in the novel that suggest Joyce's influence, for example a passage detailing

¹⁴ For McLuhan, Joycean stream of consciousness surpasses the sensory fragmentation of the visual Gutenberg world: "Literacy had made of the enlightened individual a closed system, and set up a gap between appearance and reality which ended with such discoveries as the stream of consciousness" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 278).

¹⁵ For a discussion of the influence of Ruskin on American antimodernism see Lears, 62-66.

¹⁶ See Charles T. Dougherty, "Joyce and Ruskin." *Notes and Queries* 198 (1953): 76-77.

¹⁷ See for example Jacob Korg, "Polyglotism in Rabelais and *Finnegans Wake*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 26.1 (2002): 58-65.

Martin's ability to say prayers by rote ("He was able to say the rosary without listening, answering to each prayer without giving it a thought. As a boy he'd been troubled by this capacity. Sometimes a rosary ended and he forgot to get up. His mother had regarded it as a sign of piety" [f41]) which recalls Stephen Dedalus's realization that "he had dared to wear the mask of holiness before the tabernacle itself while his soul was a living mass of corruption" (137). Other Joycean moments include Martin's contemplative ramble through the streets of Coulee Hill (f144-147), his epiphany on the doorstep of the seminary when he rejects the priesthood (f98), and the final stream of consciousness as he makes his decision to leave the town (f213-215):

I don't know why but I couldn't say let's go even when I knew she'd go when I knew if we didn't go she'd ask me to stay. She wants it all. All all all is hardly enough. And the time by the graveyard fence when she took off her pants and that smooth body not tufted with mystery or darkness or shame but naked to all my invented reluctance and did you find out she said about the damnation and lies and more lies and playing cards with the devil was the only truth in the lot In Loving Memory of a Dear Husband and bending down and seeing the hoof... The tail. Who is the stranger? The twin tailed coat. The faint smell of brimstone somewhere. The horns, by God. (f214-15).

This interior monologue conflates memories of Martin's adolescent sex with Kay and his grandmother's ghost stories at a time when he is experiencing intense emotions occasioned by Louie's death and Kay's marriage. In its references to damnation, the devil, and even the smell of sulphur, Kroetsch's language recalls the hell-fire sermonizing in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (119-122), while the

combination of run-on sentences and memories of sexual encounters brings to mind Molly Bloom's final monologue in *Ulysses*.

When Sick for Home, written at an early point in Kroetsch's career, is clearly influenced by the modernism of James Joyce. In his later criticism Kroetsch overtly rejects modernism; however, there is a tension between this stated rejection and his actual practices. In "Disunity as Unity," Kroetsch attacks T.S. Eliot, claiming "In Eliot I hear still a longing for the unity of story or narrative" (22). Kroetsch's comment is supportable by reference to Eliot's essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," in which he suggests that myth in modern literature is "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the [...] anarchy which is contemporary history" (201). In *When Sick for Home* Kroetsch appears to back away from one set of ordering myths, those of the Christian religion, by having his protagonist reject the idea of becoming a priest. Martin realizes that the main reason for his desire to become a priest at the age of fifteen during the Second World War had been to retrieve a sense of order: "I was fifteen years old and the world was gone mad" (f69). However, while the character Martin rejects this kind of ordering myth, it is clear that the author Kroetsch does not, as the novel is tightly structured around the forty days of Lent, commencing the day before Ash Wednesday and finishing the day after Easter Sunday.

In his craving for organic unity, Kroetsch is aligned with those modernist writers who are wary of the impact of modernization. This is in spite of Kroetsch's vilification of T.S. Eliot and adulation of William Carlos Williams, whom he represents as a proto-postmodernist: "In Williams I hear an acceptance of, even a celebration of, multiplicity" ("Disunity as Unity" 23). In this essay Kroetsch translates "multiplicity" into Bakhtinian terms, stating that Canadians must "remain

polyphonic” (23) as this will liberate them from “a restricted or restrictive cluster of meta-narratives” (23). Metanarratives are disparaged for proffering a seductive aura of finality which, in effect, disguises the complexity of the world. Therefore, it is clear that Kroetsch dismisses metanarratives not because they are all-encompassing, but because they present an *illusion* that they are all-encompassing whereas in fact they are “restricted or restrictive” (23).

In the same essay Kroetsch praises Margaret Laurence for what he sees as a trait of Canada’s national literature: “In Canadian writing there is little sense of a privileged self at the centre,” which he sees as being exemplified by the way that Laurence’s protagonist Morag Gunn “springs from a multiplicity of stories” (28). Canadians, Kroetsch argues, are “skilful shape changers”: “We insist on staying multiple” (28). As in the writings of McLuhan, I argue that for Kroetsch the concept of “multiplicity” is associated with wholeness and organic unity, rather than the sequential fragmentation of post-Gutenberg, post-Renaissance man. This is clearly signalled in Kroetsch’s title for this article, “Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy.” While “disunity” may traditionally be associated with images relating to shattering and fragmentation, Kroetsch instead suggests that “disunity” ensures inclusiveness and multiplicity. He argues that in Canadian writing such as that of Laurence the *illusion* of a singular self is dispelled. The basis of Kroetsch’s critique is his sense that this illusion had always been based upon a sequential and fragmented Gutenberg vision. To instil a sense of disunity *as* unity is to reiterate the importance of the same qualities that McLuhan values, qualities associated with a nostalgic longing for the kind of wholeness that seemed to be available in pre-modern times. As Krupnick argues of McLuhan, “We can observe in his project the seeming contradiction of reactionary medievalism and technology-oriented futurism, but ultimately the vision –

of wholeness, unity, totality – is the same” (108). In fact, Kroetsch is more reactionary than McLuhan, in that at least McLuhan sees the new electronic media as offering a means to bind humanity together again, whereas Kroetsch sees them only in terms of their destructive impact on the aural-oral culture of rural Alberta.

Kroetsch’s rejection of “high modernism” in his later literary criticism can be seen as the desire of a writer to set himself apart from literary forebears, demonstrating what Harold Bloom has deemed the “anxiety of influence.” However, certainly in *When Sick for Home* it is apparent that Kroetsch has taken inspiration from modernist writers, most notably Joyce. *When Sick for Home* has obvious correlations with modernist ideals about the use of myth as a unifying structure. Furthermore, as this thesis will go on to explore, even in Kroetsch’s later, ostensibly postmodern novels he is following in the path of the antimodern modernists, in a manner that recalls the experience of McLuhan before him. While in his critical essays Kroetsch claims that he is in favour of plurality and fragmentation, analysis of his fiction reveals that his intention is to fit fractured elements together again into a unified, organic whole: a project that has much in common with both romanticism and its descendant, antimodernism. There is a clear tension between Kroetsch’s stated critical position and the project enacted by his fictional works.

In *When Sick for Home* concerns that continue to reverberate throughout Kroetsch’s work are already present. In particular, it is clear that he shares with McLuhan a distaste for linear, sequential ideas of order that have dominated Western humanity since the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press. Sequential order is considered to be harmful because it splits and fragments the senses, displacing the holistic unity of an “audile-tactile” relationship between humanity and nature. In its place Kroetsch, like McLuhan, stresses the desirability of recapturing an organic,

unified existence associated with a time before modernization. If Kroetsch's work is read along the lines established by McLuhan, it is clear that the elements of narrative circularity and simultaneity in Kroetsch's work are continuations of antimodernist reactions against modernity. He exhibits a romantic desire to recapture the values associated with a time prior to (or existing outside of) the havoc wreaked by the industrialization that McLuhan links so forcefully to the arrival of the mechanical, print era. In his most recent novels, Kroetsch suggests that one should return to forms of art that predate the age of print: in *The Puppeteer* he turns to icons, embroidery and shadow puppets, while in *The Man from the Creeks* the ballads of Robert Service form a bridge between orality and the written word.

Furthermore, while Kroetsch's novels often feature fragmented, divided protagonists, these characters are not celebrated for these qualities, but are depicted as craving a sense of organic wholeness. In *The Studhorse Man* Demeter Proudfoot aims to become an "integral" man like Hazard Lepage and his *When Sick for Home* prototype Louie Cormier. In *Gone Indian* Jeremy Sadness's desire to "go native" is rooted in his desire to achieve organic unity, while Dorf in *Alibi* craves the earthy union offered to him by the mud spa at Lapsi, and subsequently he becomes a Greek monk in *The Puppeteer*, embracing a monastic medieval existence. Far from embracing fragmentation, Kroetsch's protagonists actively strive to avoid it.

That reactionary ideas appear in an early, unpublished work by an author who subsequently attained the reputation of being the foremost postmodern writer in Canada may, one might think, exemplify early ideas whose conservatism he would reject over time. However, these ideas continue to abound in Kroetsch's later novels. For example, his 1978 novel *What the Crow Said* idealizes the orality of rural Alberta culture. Kroetsch remarks, "When I was writing *What the Crow Said*, beginning *Years*

later..., suddenly just with that phrase, I had available to me all that people said years later, that whole fabric of gossip and story” (*Labyrinths* 169). This quotation encapsulates Kroetsch’s longing for the completeness of a “whole fabric,” an organic interweaving of humanity achieved through orality, indicating his continued faith in the romantic ideal of a pre-print society.¹⁸ The conservative tendencies in *When Sick for Home* reappear in his subsequent fictions. In spite of his later experimentation with metafictional devices, throughout Kroetsch’s career he reiterates his nostalgia for an imagined pre-modern era of organic wholeness and sensory integration.

¹⁸ Kroetsch’s regional pride intersects with his valorization of orality in his discussion of *What the Crow Said*, as he goes on to comment that in this text he takes as a “given” the idea that Alberta has a pre-technological and oral culture (*Labyrinths* 72).

Chapter 3: *But We Are Exiles* and *The Words of My Roaring*

In an incident in Kroetsch's first published novel *But We Are Exiles* (1965), the riverboat pilot Peter Guy encounters Lawrence Firth, an Inuit man who is camping with his family on the Arctic coast. Learning that the family cannot leave the area to go to their hunting grounds because of their debts to the Hudson's Bay Company, Peter writes an instruction for his bank to pay Lawrence two thousand dollars, and attempts to give it to him. Lawrence does not understand what the paper means initially, as he tells Peter "We can't read" (64). When Peter explains, Lawrence initially refuses to accept the offer, but Peter finally succeeds in giving him his money by bartering the bank instruction:

"Please," he said to the Eskimo, "take this and you can *leave*."

The Eskimo offered the mug of tea: "And you take this, please."

"I'll trade you," Peter said.

And formally they traded, the piece of paper, the cup of tea (64).

In this encounter between an illiterate indigene and a "college man" (101) – in other words, an archetypal "Gutenberg Man" – Peter renounces modernity by giving away the money that connects him with the modern world. By aligning himself with these indigenous people, Peter attempts to separate himself from the technocracy of the Canadian white-settler elite, to which he belongs by birth. I will return to this passage later in this chapter, as I believe that it reveals a crucial point about Kroetsch's preoccupations. While Kroetsch's writing is ostensibly postcolonial, his reaction against the legacy of empire is informed not by resistance to imperialism per se, but by an abhorrence of the destructive and fragmenting modernity propagated by colonization, which is perceived as threatening the "integral" ways of life that are

represented by indigenous peoples. Kroetsch's disavowal of modernity is an important aspect of both novels discussed in this chapter. In *But We Are Exiles*, Kroetsch suggests that settler Canadians can achieve a sense of integration and unity by exiling themselves from modernity, and by learning from indigenous peoples. In *The Words of My Roaring* (1966), he demonstrates his belief that an audile-tactile prairie culture can counteract the negative connotations of modernity. Both novels indicate Kroetsch's antipathy towards modern technology and its impact on people, as well as his valorization of "pre-modern" ways of life, represented not only by native peoples, but also by the oral communities of the rural prairie town in *The Words of My Roaring* and the riverboat crew in *But We Are Exiles*.

But We Are Exiles was inspired by the author's past experience of working on boats on the Mackenzie River in Canada's far north. The novel centres on Peter Guy, the pilot of the riverboat *Nahanni Jane*, who witnesses the death of the boat's new owner Michael Hornyak. Hornyak is set alight when his lamp bulb breaks sparking an explosion of fuel fumes, and he drowns when he jumps overboard to quench the flames. Peter deliberately refrains from warning Hornyak against using a lamp without a safety shield, and he is therefore partly responsible for the accident. In the course of the novel, it is revealed that the men had been friends in the past, but their friendship had ended when Hornyak had sex with Peter's girlfriend Kettle Fraser. Reunited by Hornyak's death, Kettle and Peter begin an affair. At the novel's climax, Peter is stranded on a barge where Hornyak's body is being stored during a storm. He throws the corpse overboard and uses the tarpaulin that had covered the body to shield himself from the elements. The ending of the novel is ambiguous as Peter, though alive, is in a highly precarious situation that may prove to be fatal.

Kroetsch's unpublished novel *When Sick for Home* reveals the author's desire to recapture an organic wholeness of being that he sees as being under threat from the modern world. This idea continues to resonate in his first published novels, *But We Are Exiles* and *The Words of My Roaring*. In each text the protagonist seeks to rescue a sense of organic, unified identity from the impact of modernity. Kroetsch works within existing antimodernist paradigms by critiquing the devastating effects of the modern world on humans as integral beings. In this respect his underlying ideas parallel those of McLuhan. To illustrate the destructive potential of modernity on the sensory balance of humanity, McLuhan uses the cautionary tale of Humpty-Dumpty as a metaphor: the integral being, the egg, falls from a wall made of "uniformly fragmented bricks that arise with specialisms and bureaucracies" (*Understanding Media* 183). However, McLuhan optimistically suggests that "the electric age [...] is putting Humpty-Dumpty back together again" as, thanks to innovative electronic technology, the "visual, specialist, and fragmented Westerner [...] now begins to translate the visual or eye man back into the tribal and oral pattern with its seamless web of kinship and interdependence" (*Understanding Media* 184, 50). Like McLuhan, Kroetsch decries the negative impact of the "uniformly fragmented" outcomes of modernity on integral modes of being, but it is clear that Kroetsch is much more pessimistic about the possibilities of electronic technologies to recapture the organic sensory integration disrupted by modernity. Unlike McLuhan, Kroetsch indicates in *But We Are Exiles* and *The Words of My Roaring* that humanity can only achieve a unified existence by abandoning modern technology altogether.

While McLuhan can see some benefits in modern technologies, suggesting that certain inventions enable people to recapture pre-modern modes of existence that allow the recovery of sensory integration, for Kroetsch all they offer is destruction. A

key example is the function of the electric light-bulb within *But We Are Exiles*.

Hornyak's fate is sealed when he "ben[ds] over a bin of tangled extension cords and loose bulbs and rolls of tape and pull[s] out a lamp that ha[s] no wire mask protecting the bulb" (9). Robert Lecker connects the image of the light with M.H. Abrams's work on the dichotomy of mimesis and expression in literature, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, suggesting that Hornyak's association with the lamp indicates his connection with "the source of expression and 'passion' rather than thought" (28). In contrast, I argue that the significance of this lamp lies in the fact that it is an *electric* light.

Hornyak's accident is an example of the destructive potential of the technologies of modernity. Following Hornyak's death Bill Arnafson, the chief engineer, explains: "Somehow he smashed the light-bulb while he was coming through the man-hole; he got caught in the burst of flame like he was in a blow-torch" (4). Kroetsch ensures that the trappings of contemporary technology have deadly connotations: electric light bulbs can be fatal, and even telephone poles look "like scaffolds" (140-1).

At its core, *But We Are Exiles* is the story of how the "Gutenberg Man" Peter Guy becomes an "integral man" through the rejection of technological modernity. Peter achieves this through sensory integration as a pilot on the riverboat, through his contact with indigenous peoples, and through a rediscovery of the importance of the "audile-tactile" senses in his sexual relationship with Kettle. Early in the novel, Kroetsch establishes that Peter's senses are divided from each other. This sensory division is paralleled by the idea that Peter perceives himself purely in terms of utility:

Here the pilot's eyes and hands were isolated yet in absolute command. Pure. He wanted to shout the word. This is mine. Storm, ice, wind, rock – those can challenge me. But here a man is defined free from the terrors of human

relationships. A man's function is so clear that each is simply called chief, skipper, second, pilot. (19)

At this point in the novel, Peter has not yet become an "integral" person. He celebrates the fact that he is what McLuhan calls a "specialist" – one who uses "only a limited segment of his faculties" (*Understanding Media* 183). His rejection of sensory integration is mirrored by his failure to integrate socially with the other members of the boat's crew. By barely communicating with his fellow crewmembers he maintains his distance from those around him. Annoyed by an overly talkative colleague, one crewmember remarks, "You ought to take a lesson from Guy, here. He don't open his mouth to give a man the time of day" (65). In the course of the novel, Peter achieves sensory realignment through his sexual reawakening with Kettle Fraser, rediscovering the pleasure of the spoken word in the process. A large part of their relationship is based on talking and listening: in one sequence they exchange banter, making word play with Peter's name:

"Be kind, Peter. Be Peter the Great."

"At the rate I'm going, I'll be Peter the Pater."

"Not at the rate you're going this morning."

"I've got to go stand in the snow," he said.

"Be Peter the Peter," she said. "Come back to bed." (76).

In this exchange, the conversation involves participation of both parties. Not only do Kettle and Peter listen to each other, but their words also have a "tactile" function, contributing to their erotic relationship. As I will go on to explore in my discussion of *The Words of My Roaring*, Kroetsch contrasts the integration of the visual and the audile-tactile senses achieved through face-to-face conversation with the single-sense

saturation of the medium of radio, which creates its effects exclusively through the sense of hearing.¹

Kroetsch criticizes the impact of modern technology by cementing the connections between Peter Guy's initial isolation and his reliance upon printed books and the radio instead of human contact: "Each fall he relieved a shore agent and had little to do but wait until late winter [...] He read everything he could find, listened to a short-wave radio, but he was no longer tempted to go outside to the world he reached through reading and listening" (58). However, even at this point Kroetsch indicates the existence of a tension between Peter's reliance upon technologies to provide contact with other people, and his desire for human contact, as he occasionally surfaces in the community "at a party or at the curling rink or in the beer-parlour" (59).

Peter's move away from the Gutenberg world is signalled by failure to write to his father: "Each time he tried he found he had less and less to talk about; each attempt showed him to be more isolated from the promises and hopes of his childhood" (41). As a lawyer, Peter's father is a quintessential Gutenberg man. Like Hornyak, who drives a Rolls Royce, Peter's father is associated with his car, "an old green Graham-Paige, a touring car almost as long as a boxcar" (42). Once again, Kroetsch highlights the potential danger that results when humans cede power to machines: Peter's father "would speed in the car, and yet it was so heavy that when it was moving fast the brakes weren't strong enough to stop it; it rolled and the driver had to wait until it quit" (42). In his rejection of his childhood lifestyle, Peter is

¹ The ideal of members of a community relating to each other through face-to-face contact is recurring theme in antimodern discourse. Lears points out that one of the aims of the antimodern groups associated with the ideals of the English Arts and Crafts movement was "the desire to reintegrate a fragmented sense of self" through "satisfying labor in an 'organic' community of face-to-face relationships" (64). Kroetsch's depiction of an idealized working community on the *Nahanni Jane* in *But We Are Exiles* is therefore a continuation of a theme present in critiques of industrial modernity since the late nineteenth century.

distancing himself from the modernity that his father represents. His father is determined that his son should enjoy the superficial trappings of a sophisticated and urbane culture: “The father [...] thought his son should have a crack at owning a sports car. And a year off from school to read the classics. And maybe one of those summers digging for odds and ends in Greece or Egypt” (42). According to the logic of Peter’s father, reading and history are as much emblems of urban sophistication as the “sports car” that he desires his son to acquire. Through the character of Peter’s father, Kroetsch levels criticism at the urban elite who reduce everything in the world into visual images that are also objects to be possessed: automobiles, books, and archaeological oddments.

It is particularly necessary for Peter to break his obsession with visual images in order to acquire sensory unity. His senses have become unbalanced by his graphic visual memory of Hornyak and Kettle making love in a Banff hotel room many years previously. Throughout the text there are warnings about the dangers of placing too much importance on sight alone. This motif is foreshadowed by the epigraph, which is from the Narcissus segment of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as translated by Arthur Golding.² Besides being utilized as an allegory for lack of self-awareness,³ elements of the Narcissus myth are employed to problematize the visual sense within the text. At the start of the novel Peter bends over the “mirror-smooth” river, and views his own image in its surface: “He studied the reflection as if not sure whom he might see” (2). Peter had discovered Kettle and Hornyak’s affair when he opened a hotel-room door and “looked in on a mirror and the image of two raging bodies,” and had since

² The epigraph is from book 3, lines 429-33: “This Lady bare a sonne / Whose beautie at his verie birth might justly love have wonne. / *Narcissus* did she call his name. Of whom the Prophet sage / Demanded if the childe should live to many years of age, / Made aunswere, yea full long, so that him selfe he doe not know.”

³ Lee Spinks’s essay “Kroetsch’s Narcissus: Alienation and Identity in *But We Are Exiles*” explores Kroetsch’s use of the Narcissus myth in this context.

felt “caught there, trapped, doomed, in that mahogany frame” (145). Realizing that Peter is fixated upon this moment, Kettle attempts to destroy this visual image, exhorting Peter to “Break the mirror” (125). She also tries to reconfigure Peter’s senses to privilege the audile-tactile. This becomes apparent in a scene where Kettle and Peter make love: “‘Touch is real,’ she said. ‘Touch is how we can know.’ And she moved his hand, ‘Touch me there.’ She bent and kissed him. ‘I taste you. I smell you. Even in all the darkness’” (55). In this sequence, Kettle highlights the erotic possibilities of touch, taste, and smell through the medium of speech. In turn, Peter reciprocates, “And he touched her then, her breasts, his hand touching the damp of her thighs” (55). By severing their reliance on sight, Kettle and Peter achieve a more balanced sensory integration, recapturing an awareness of organic unity.

As well as through his sexual relationship with Kettle, Peter’s sensory balance is realigned through his work as a riverboat pilot. Although he initially sees his job as no more than a “function” (19), and therefore makes limited use of his faculties, Peter comes to realize that the complexity of his job as a pilot means that he must acquire sensory integration in order to succeed. As a pilot his sense of sight is vital, but he learns to use his other senses because vision can be impaired, for example, by forest fires around the river: “Smoke in his eyes, his nostrils; smoke obscuring what he had done, what he must do” (25). At one point Peter recalls his first trip on the river:

And when the forward barge hit a mudbank Peter discovered that the only channel through Beaver Lake was narrow and tricky; only a man with experience and judgment, who could read the meaning in a shade of colour, who could grip the wheel and guess his way below the surface – only he could take the heavily loaded barges through. (123).

Steering the boat to safety relies on complete sensory immersion, as the pilot must not just read the visual signs of the water, but also feel the movement of the boat, guiding it by relying on the tactile sense. In becoming a pilot, Peter learns that he must use his senses in unison, not isolation, in order to negotiate the river's channels.

Significantly, the re-integration of Peter's senses occurs in part through his contact with Canada's indigenous peoples. In order to obtain the awareness of the environment necessary for him to guide the boat, Peter must learn from a Native, discovering how to take his cues from nature, not from technological devices: "his teacher was old Jonas Bird, an Indian who was pleased that a white man should want to know a wind spot from a rock riffle, a boil spot from a hidden boulder; that a college man should want to know what a flock of ducks could tell him about the depth of water; what rising fish could tell him about the current" (100-01). Peter learns to be a boat pilot from an indigene, thereby moving closer towards becoming an integral man. While Kroetsch valorizes Native beliefs in this novel and in his later work *Gone Indian*, it is clear that he associates Native and Inuit peoples with a kind of pre-modern authenticity and sensory integration that is lacking among the "Gutenberg Men" who prize modernization and technology. Although Kroetsch clearly constructs the "anachronism" of indigenous peoples as a positive attribute given his rejection of modernity and its technologies, nonetheless he is continuing a long tradition in which colonized peoples are viewed as belonging to a different time frame than their colonizers. Jessup points out that in colonial cultures, "concepts of time have been harnessed by some to situate others outside an advancing world order and, in so doing, to justify the subordination of those others to colonial rule" ("Bushwhackers" 137). While Kroetsch's intention in representing Native peoples is surely benevolent,

he reinforces the sense that they represent an anachronous existence in this text and later works such as *Gone Indian and Badlands*.

Even Kettle and Guy's resurgent sexual relationship and its restoration of their sensory balance is predicated on a kind of antimodern indigenization, as they renew their affair following their attendance at an Eskimo drum dance, which is described in audile-tactile terms:

four Eskimoes each hitting a large flat drum, the bottom, one side then the other, tum-tum, tum-tum, a dancer rising, advancing onto the empty floor, shaking her head out of her parka hood, beginning to dance, sing, to mimic, acting out a story as she dances; a story of snow, of a swan, of a hunter: other dancers join her on the floor, learn her words, her gestures, hypnotized by the frenzied, controlled drumbeats: in the hot room a bystander shouts his shared joy and tension – (51)

In the course of the evening, Kettle herself sings a traditional Inuit song about a hunter who blames a missed shot on a faulty rifle – an example of the failures of technology told from an indigenous perspective – and participates in one of the dances (52-3). To join in an aboriginal dance is an act of indigenization on the part of the settler. As Terry Goldie puts it, when a settler takes part in a tribal dance they join “a completely different realm of being in which the despairingly linear methods of civilized order are left far behind” (*Fear and Temptation* 141). Significantly, the negative qualities associated with “civilization” in Goldie's terminology are those criticized in both Kroetsch's and McLuhan's rejections of modernity. McLuhan and Kroetsch are concerned with the destruction of the “integral,” organically interwoven modes of tribal existence by modernity. By re-privileging the audile-tactile senses associated with the pre-modern era over the visual culture of modernity, Kroetsch

expresses nostalgia for ways of existence that pre-date the Gutenberg era. In effect, Kroetsch does not see indigenous people for what they *are* but for what they *can do* for the white settler; they function as human time machines, enabling the receptive settler to free him or herself from modernity and recapture an “authentic” organically unified existence.

Kroetsch embodies his reaction against modernization in the character of Gordon Fraser, the father of Kettle. Formerly employed by the Hudson’s Bay Company, Fraser’s presence in Canada is related to his numeracy and literacy, signalling the connection between colonization and the Gutenberg world: he says he came to “this goddamned godforsaken country because the Hudson’s Bay could buy young Scots cheap to do their adding and subtracting (46). Again, while Kroetsch indicates the negative aspects of colonization, he focuses on an area that associates the act of colonization with modernization and its analogue, commercialisation. By aligning himself with the Inuit, Fraser has relinquished the negative aspects of modernity represented by the Canadian establishment that he shares his European ancestry with: he “stayed with the ’Skimos when the government moved the town to Inuvik” (26). At the time of the main events of the novel, Fraser is living a semi-indigenized existence on the Arctic coast, far from Canada’s metropolitan centres. Gordon wears indigenous footwear (“mukluks and moccasin rubbers” [39-40]), and lives with an Eskimo woman (45). Since taking his position in the Arctic Circle many decades previously he had only once “gone out to civilization for a month’s holiday,” but “in ten days had returned north,” feeling that “The outside was suffocating” (33). Paradoxically, the freedom which he has experienced in his semi-indigenized existence in the far north, free from most of the trappings of modernity, is something which has imprisoned him, as he is unable to return to the modern world exemplified

by the metropolis: “it’s a screwing jail, this place. I *can’t* leave. Just the sight of one skyscraper or one traffic light or one telephone booth – and I’d be back” (46). The urban objects that he singles out for attention in this extract are strongly resonant with Goldie’s suggestion that in the mind of the indigenized settler, “civilized order” is “despairingly linear” (*Fear and Temptation* 141).

Equating his individual identity with concepts of the wilderness as a place of psychic liberation, Fraser is “trapped” when confronted with any kind of developed landscape. Peter Guy shares Gordon’s distaste for urban modernity. At the end of his first season in the north

he got to Edmonton and couldn’t leave the airport building. He was on his way east, he thought. But he couldn’t change airports. He walked out to the circle in front of the terminal in Edmonton and looked at the string of bright yellow taxis waiting to whisk him away, and when a bent wiry man picked up his suitcase he snatched it back and fled into the building – out of the late October sunshine, out of the world of autumn and football games and roaring traffic – and he slept in a chair until he could catch the next plane going anywhere into the north. (58)

By rejecting the trappings of urban life, Peter becomes disconnected from the modern world. In *But We Are Exiles*, Kroetsch idealizes the north as the antimodern antithesis of the linear metropolis that is polluted by “roaring traffic.”⁴ Peter later learns that his childhood home has been bulldozed, “torn down to make room for a highway” (59), indicating the destructive impact of technological modernity and its fetishization of the “progress” represented by the automobile.

⁴ The continued mythologizing of the north as a Canadian ideal is apparent in Sherrill Grace’s *Canada and the Idea of North* and John Moss’s *Enduring Dreams*. In contrast, in “North of 60°: Homeland or Frontier,” Karim-Aly S. Kassam aims to demythologize the north by emphasizing its political and social reality as a populated entity.

If Gordon Fraser is the text's exemplary figure in terms of the rejection of modernity, then Mike Hornyak is his antithesis. Hornyak wants to build roads everywhere, obliterating the natural environment. Hornyak drives a Rolls Royce, which he calls his "jalopy" (136). Like Peter's father, he is obsessed with speed and technology: "'Build us lots of highways,' Hornyak shouted. Over the diesel and gravel roar. The smell of tar. To dusty-faced men on cats and tractors, men swinging picks and pouring cement and laying asphalt. 'Build them right out into Georgia Strait'" (136). Hornyak is a kindred spirit of the Italian Futurist artists, whose manifesto proclaimed: "We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty; the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned by great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath – a roaring car that seems to run on shrapnel – is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" (qtd. in Hughes 43). Hornyak's fetishization of modern technology establishes him as the converse of Peter Guy: Peter rejects modernity, while Hornyak celebrates it. Hornyak is associated with the "modernization" that threatens the crew of the *Nahanni Jane*. He purchases the boat for his frozen fish business aiming to "turn her into a fish packer" (3), a static factory boat, much to the disdain of the crew. Hornyak resents the oral culture existing on the *Nahanni Jane* (exemplified by the crew's tall tales and beer-parlour style banter about sex [65-67]), telling Peter "I didn't buy this boat to turn it into a goddamned beer-parlour" (22). As discussed in the previous chapter, Kroetsch reveals his preoccupation with the importance of beer parlours to western Canadian orality in his critical writing ("The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues" 17). Hornyak's rejection of this oral culture underlines his unsympathetic qualities.

In the account of Peter and Hornyak's road trip across Canada as young men, it becomes clear that Hornyak's sensations are dependent on the modern world. His

appetites for food and sex are enhanced by the technology of the automobile. At one point the connection between Hornyak, petrol and the printed word is cemented when they pass a roadside advertisement:

And a big red ESSO sign and E

A

T the neon blaze commanded. (136)

Upon seeing this sign, Hornyak immediately announces “I’m starving”: it is as if it takes this command for him to realize his own hunger (136). Hornyak’s sexual urges are also associated with motorcars, as he uses his Rolls Royce as a venue for his sexual encounters, picking up women and having sex with them “in the back seat” (35). Even Peter is seduced into Hornyak’s way of life, recalling that by the end of their road trip “he was not a twenty-year-old virgin, for one evening they picked up a girl in Regina and took turns driving until they set her down in front of the bus depot in Medicine Hat” (10). In the sequence detailing Peter and Hornyak’s road trip, Kroetsch recognizes the seductive appeal of new technology, and the lure of the irresponsible and impulsive lifestyle that he associates with the sequential, fragmented modernized existence. However, it is clear that Kroetsch is critical of this way of life, associated primarily with Hornyak. Peter Guy renounces modernity, and instead valorizes the northern wilderness and the possibility of an “integral” existence that it offers. In contrast, Hornyak dies as a result of modern technology, in an explosion of aviation fuel fumes caused by a broken light bulb. As in *When Sick for Home*, Kroetsch constructs his text to ensure that modernity has negative connotations, while the un-modern environment (as represented by the rural landscape and the wilderness) is associated with organic unity and sensory balance.

While Hornyak is associated with the technologies of modernity, Peter is linked to natural imagery and therefore is constructed as a much more sympathetic character. At one point when piloting the boat he alters the course “to avoid a fat brown bear that was swimming across the river” (72). In marked contrast, the face of Hornyak’s corpse is eaten by a bear, which seems to enact nature’s revenge on a character who does not appreciate it (85). Peter is revealed to have a strong affinity for nature. At one point Peter and Kettle visit a secluded island, where they experience nature primarily through their sense of hearing, indicating that they are losing their modern sensory bias towards sight: “When they stood still they thought they must hear the frost breaking the few blades of grass. Then, as they listened, holding their breath, they heard a faint stirring of breeze on a twig, a last leaf” (121).⁵ Peter recalls his first visit to the area, which is described in idyllic terms that emphasize the connection between indigenous peoples and nature:

On the islands the Indians were camped, smoke rising blue from their fires in front of tents. Canoes lined the beaches; fish were drying on racks: whitefish and lake trout and inconnu. Beaver Lake was polished a silver-blue as far as the pink sky of evening and the purple hills, and near at hand the rising fish drew circles on the water like raindrops on a pond. (122-3)

The presence of loons, ducks, geese and swans is also noted (123). This passage is similar to the idyllic pastoral sequences in *When Sick for Home*, as detailed in the previous chapter: in both novels Kroetsch’s protagonists idealize the natural world, seeing it as representing a positive alternative to the technology-obsessed culture around them. In contrast, Hornyak builds over the natural environment. While in the

⁵ Kroetsch reiterates the connection between nature and aural sensation in the opening lines of his travel book *Alberta* (1968): “Spring is not seen, but heard, in Alberta [...] Listen to the harsh impatience of crows nesting in the poplars at the wheatfield’s edge. Listen to the trilled hoarse oka-lee-a of the red-winged blackbirds [...] Listen to the chuck of paired pintails and teals and mallards as they watch, then tip down to the succulent mud beneath the slough’s stilled surface” (2).

wilderness with Peter, Kettle recalls that her husband built a “brand new” house, with “brand new” trees and fences (123): “Even the lawn – it arrived one day while we were eating lunch” (123-4). By establishing a disjunction between the natural beauty of the wilderness environment and the glaring “newness” of Hornyak’s home, Kroetsch emphasizes the positive qualities of the former and the negative attributes of the latter.

After Hornyak’s death, Peter seeks to dissociate himself from the kind of lifestyle represented by his former friend. The donation of his savings to Lawrence Firth saves him from his own desires to adopt an extravagant lifestyle represented by modernity:

for the first time he felt the temptation to spend [...] Like a prospector who has struck it rich, he would blow it in. He’d take a room in the best hotel. That was the one dream of the North; to take a room for a month in the Selkirk or the King Edward or the Macdonald, and to give parties for all your old pals and all the pretty waitresses and salesgirls, and to ring up for more booze and leave ten-dollar tips and keep a taxi waiting while you go to a double feature; and to try on a pair of shoes and tell the clerk to wrap up six pair, and to buy clean shirts by the dozen and throw the dirty ones away. (59-60)

By giving away his money, Peter escapes from the possibility of turning into a decadent participant in modernity like his former friend: “he knew the Eskimo must take it [the \$2000] or he would be like Hornyak – the Hornyak he met that summer day on the prairies – Hornyak wheeling bird-free through the dry prairies” (64).

It is possible to read the encounter between Peter and the Inuit man Lawrence Firth within existing settler Canadian postcolonial parameters: as he grows in awareness about the marginalized existence of indigenous peoples, Peter becomes

aware of his complicity in their plight due to his settler-invader ancestry, and therefore he makes a key act of atonement about his colonial guilt regarding the situation of indigenous peoples by giving Lawrence his savings of \$2000 dollars. However, this sequence is an emphatic example of Kroetsch's desire for the rejection of modernity: by giving away his savings Peter divorces himself from the valorization of the accumulation and spending of wealth that he identifies with modern society. Possessing money means that he is implicated in modernity, and is like Mike Hornyak, the man who represents everything that he despises. "Bartering" away his savings in exchange for a cup of tea not only removes him from the money economy associated with modernity, but it also enables him to rescue an Inuit man from the clutches of the same system: if Lawrence pays off his debts to the Hudson's Bay Company he can return to his integral occupation of fishing and trapping.⁶ By giving away his money, Peter emphasizes that he has adopted a value system which privileges traditional, pre-modern ways of existence – associated in this case with the indigene – at the expense of modernity.⁷

Furthermore, through making contact with indigenous peoples, Peter grows to realize the importance of being part of a community, and aligns himself with the men on the boat. In return, these men accept him and protect him. When Hornyak's body is discovered and placed in one of the boat's barges, Peter wants to return to the port of Norman Wells where there would be a thorough investigation. The rest of the crew unites to prevent Peter from taking this self-harming course of action, urging him to push on to Yellowknife instead, where there will be less interest from officials. The

⁶ McLuhan includes "fisherman" in his list of integral occupations that contrast with the fragmented specialisms of the modern world (*Understanding Media* 138).

⁷ Peter's act also has connotations of the West Coast indigenous gift-giving custom of potlatch. By having Peter participate in bartering or potlatch, Kroetsch emphasizes the existence of alternative aboriginal economies which appear to be more 'authentic' and autochthonous than the modern monetary system. This reinforces the binary opposition of modern and primitive, which recurs throughout his fiction.

words of the mate Jeremiah Pottle emphasize the gulf between the “integral men” of the crew and the “Gutenberg Men” who officiate over their actions through the medium of the printed word, as he argues that “It wasn’t your fault any more than it was anybody else’s. So why waste more time filling out more forms for some ass up there in some office?” (105). In Pottle’s construction, the “ass” in the office is an example of what McLuhan calls the “specialisms and bureaucracies” that epitomize the sensory imbalance of post-Gutenberg humanity (*Understanding Media* 183). Peter’s realization that that the boat’s crew are all “castaways, exiles, fugitives” (106) refers to more than their physical removal from a metropolitan existence: these people have exiled themselves from modernity, forming their own organic community on the boat.

However, the final section of *But We Are Exiles* leads to questions about the possibility of renouncing modernity. While the crew may be “exiles” from the urban environment and from the excesses of twentieth-century technophilia, nonetheless the *Nahanni Jane* is a piece of technology in itself. Furthermore, the boat represents the desire of humanity to master nature. In order to reveal humanity’s hubris regarding the devaluing of nature through modernization, Kroetsch ensures that in the battle between humans and nature, nature wins. While in *But We Are Exiles* this battle is metaphorical, in his later novel *What the Crow Said* Kroetsch literalises this image in the “War with the Sky,” in which, needless to say, the sky proves to be victorious over the mechanical instruments of humanity. In *But We Are Exiles* nature wreaks havoc on modern technology, as a barge containing construction machinery sinks in rapids: “The barge broke in half, dumping bright yellow machines like toys into the ice and the dark water” (95). In the final sequence the *Nahanni Jane* gets into trouble on Beaver Lake when a storm hits. The boat itself is a piece of specialist technology,

as Peter explains to Kettle, “These boats weren’t built to cross the lake. But if you build them with a keel to cross the lake they can’t navigate the river” (122). As the storm strikes they are hit by “the heave of a wall of water that shuddered the whole boat each time the flat-bottomed bow made its plunge” (128). Peter, who is responsive to nature (as has been established by his affiliation with the natural world in lyrical passages such as the description of Beaver Lake, above), advises his captain to head for a safe haven and not to confront the elements (129).

Ultimately, Peter makes an act of self sacrifice which enables the boat to escape, freeing the *Nahanni Jane* from its burden by cutting loose a barge, stranding himself in the process (133). The final sequence of the novel sees Peter alone on the barge, isolated from the technology represented by the *Nahanni Jane*. This enables his final act of rejection of Hornyak and, by implication, the modernity that he epitomizes, as he throws the corpse of his former friend from the barge. The concluding section describes Peter lying in a native canoe that is part of the barge’s cargo, connecting him with the “integral” humanity represented by the indigenous peoples within the text. In the last image of the novel, Peter even achieves what might be seen as a sexual union with nature, feeling in the movement of the barge in the storm “the soft delirium of his impassioned motion” (145). This final image emphasizes that in *But We Are Exiles* Kroetsch indicates the necessity of abandoning the trappings of technology, and rediscovering an integral sensory relationship with nature that will lead to the recovery of an organic wholeness missing from the modern world. Peter Guy becomes emblematic of Kroetsch’s antimodern quest for authentic experience.

Resistance to modernity continues to pervade Kroetsch’s next novel, *The Words of My Roaring*. In this text Kroetsch emphasizes the negative impact of

technology on rural Alberta life in the 1930s, but in his unpublished personal correspondence he has also remarked that he sees this novel as “a metaphor for the whole of Canada” (Letter to Donald M. Sutherland). His main target is the Social Credit Party, as led by the preacher William “Bible Bill” Aberhart. Aberhart – fictionalized in the narrative as John George Applecart – is a fire-breathing sermonizer who uses the medium of radio to propagate his views. The central figure in Kroetsch’s novel is the undertaker Johnnie Backstrom, who is an electoral candidate for Applecart’s party. His opponent is Doctor Murdoch, an elderly Ontario-born physician who is not only the incumbent representative but also one of the wealthiest men in the town of Notikeewin.⁸ Backstrom is initially seduced by Applecart’s medium and message, but eventually comes to reject it in favour of his own belief in person-to-person contact, restoring the organic unity of his senses. Like the early twentieth century antimodernists discussed by Lears (64), Kroetsch idealizes the rural “organic” community as a place where face-to-face relationships are still possible, in contrast with the modernized metropolitan environment.

In a recent article, Russell Morton Brown connects what he sees as the “postmodernism” of Kroetsch and McLuhan with the impact of radio broadcasting on Alberta in the 1930s.⁹ Brown’s argument is problematic, as his assertion that McLuhan is a “postmodernist” neglects the fact that McLuhan participates in the tradition of the antimodernist critique of modernity. Rather than agreeing with Brown’s positioning of Kroetsch as a postmodernist, I believe that Kroetsch exhibits the same antimodern tendencies as McLuhan. However, unlike McLuhan, Kroetsch does not suggest that the coming of an electronic era can undo the damage unleashed

⁸ Although Kroetsch does not mention Murdoch’s party by name, it is clearly based upon the Liberal party.

⁹ Russell Morton Brown, “Robert Kroetsch, Marshall McLuhan and Canada’s Prairie Postmodernism: the Aberhart Effect,” in Calder and Wardhaugh.

by mechanical technologies on the human psyche. Kroetsch renounces all modern technologies, be they mechanical or electronic, in favour of a nostalgic, romantic idealization of an un-modern rural life associated with oral culture.

Brown suggests that McLuhan saw “an attack of a new oral/aural culture on the older one of print” emerging in the twentieth century (129). However, while it is certainly the case that McLuhan highlights negative aspects of radio technology, it is not the “oral/aural” aspect of radio that McLuhan disapproves of per se, but rather, in his own terminology, the idea that radio is a “hot” medium (i.e. one that utilizes a single sense to saturation point, denying the possibility of the kind of organic sensory union which he sees being realized through participatory, audile-tactile “cool” media). Referring to Orson Welles’s famous broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, McLuhan writes of the “completely involving scope of the auditory image of radio,” adding that “It was Hitler who gave radio the Orson Welles treatment for *real*” (*Understanding Media* 300). Unlike Brown, I believe that McLuhan argues that radio has the potential to be dangerous *not* because it is an “oral/aural” medium, but because it is a “hot” medium. McLuhan distrusts all media that saturate a single sense to the point of overload: in this regard print, a “hot” visual medium, is just as dangerous as radio, a “hot” audile medium. In *Understanding Media* McLuhan sees “hot” media in negative terms, as “Hot media are [...] low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience” (23). He enthuses that “The ‘city slicker’ is hot, and the rustic is cool,” but indicates that, through the “cool” electronic medium of television, the people of the late twentieth century can recapture the positive aspects of life that were lost during the “hot” mechanical era (27). In other words, a new kind of electronic modernity will undo the damage done in the past, ushering in a fresh “cool” time of sensory integration and participation that undoes the

specialism and fragmentation that followed the invention of the printing press and other mechanical technologies. Like McLuhan, Kroetsch disapproves of the power of radio, as exemplified by the speeches of John George Applecart in *The Words of My Roaring*. However, in contrast with McLuhan, Kroetsch sees no possibility that any modern technology could be beneficial to humanity. The “postmodernism” that Brown associates with Kroetsch is, in fact, an antimodern quest to maintain the existence of the organic sensory integration believed to be threatened by modern technology.

Radio is the main technological target of *The Words of My Roaring*. The broadcast sermons of Applecart within the text are based on those made by the leader of Alberta’s Social Credit Party, William Aberhart. Aberhart, known as Bible Bill, was an Ontario-born Baptist minister who formed his own fundamentalist sect, the Bible Institute Baptist Church, in 1929. As early as 1925, Aberhart had begun broadcasting a Radio Sunday School from Calgary. In 1932 he adopted the principles of Social Credit, which was based on the economic theories of the Scottish engineer Major C. H. Douglas. “Social Credit” was derived from the idea that “since people never had enough money to buy all the goods produced by modern industry, governments should issue money to everyone in the form of ‘social credits,’” thereby stimulating productivity (Applied History Research Group).¹⁰ In both his reaction against urban modernity and his Bible-thumping, Aberhart can be seen as an

¹⁰ The Social Credit League – a political party created by Aberhart – won the 1935 provincial election, taking 56 of 63 seats. This was mainly due to Aberhart’s media experience, which allowed him to use the radio airwaves to spread the message of social credit through the prairies. The policy of a monthly dividend of social credits for all citizens was abandoned when the federal courts opposed Aberhart’s proposed changes. Nonetheless, the party achieved a great deal in alleviating the effects of the Depression by measures including the temporary repudiation of Alberta’s debt repayments, protection against repossession for farmers, and relief for the unemployed. Aberhart stayed in power until his death in 1943, and was succeeded by his close associate Ernest Manning. The Social Credit Party remained the dominant force in Alberta politics until its defeat by the Progressive Conservative Party in 1971. When Kroetsch was writing *The Words of My Roaring*, the Social Credit Party was still in the majority in the Alberta Legislative Assembly.

antimodern figurehead. However, in his endorsement of a heavily bureaucratic economic system, and his use of the “hot” medium of the radio as a propaganda tool, Aberhart can also be seen to be highly complicit with the processes of modernization. In *The Words of My Roaring* the protagonist Johnnie Backstrom is initially drawn to (Aberhart’s fictional counterpart) Applecart, but comes to reject his influence in favour of a more organic relationship with his constituents resulting from a growing appreciation of the importance of the rural community and its oral culture.

Kroetsch had listened to Aberhart’s broadcasts as a child. In his travelogue, *Alberta* (1968), Kroetsch writes of the appeal of Aberhart: “To weeping, praying, and applauding audiences, Bible Bill was suddenly an economic wizard, a martyr, a voice of prophecy crying in the wilderness, a lone brave man standing up against the eastern financiers, a saviour who promised redemption from the incredible woes of the depression” (*Alberta* 24). In a later interview, Kroetsch focuses on the negative aspects of the Social Credit Party, although he also emphasizes the reasons for its popularity. He recalls that when he was a child, his father had been opposed to Social Credit against the general tendencies of his community:

I had a doubly bad experience of the whole movement, not only on ideological but on personal grounds as well. It *was* a bad experience. My father felt threatened and the ideology was unacceptable. Yet in writing that story [*The Words of My Roaring*], I moved away from my personal experience to the larger dimension of the experience. I actually felt a good deal of sympathy with the desperate situation of a people looking for an ideology and a politics that would help them out of their wretchedness. (*Labyrinths of Voice* 122)

Kroetsch recreates this atmosphere in his novel. When the hungover Backstrom holds a meeting in his funeral parlour for his potential voters to hear about the party, he begins the meeting by putting on Applecart's radio broadcast:

I was dying to throw up. I was just hanging on, every muscle in my belly just dying to have one good convulsion. But I couldn't leave that room; I had to listen. Applecart – he preached every Sunday until most of the churches in the province weren't taking enough in their collection plates to pay for the grape juice they were palming off as wine. And at last I was beginning to see why. It was the biggest event of the week. Nothing could touch it. (33)

Applecart's politics are based around opposition to central Canada and its perceived economic stranglehold on the west. In particular, he rails against urban modernity as represented by the "dirty Easterners who were gouging the West" (35). He likens Toronto to the Whore of Babylon: "the Whore, it turned out, was Toronto, and all her high-muckie-muck millionaires" (36). Applecart uses Biblical rhetoric to stir Western emotions against the East:

Applecart was connecting Satan and all of hell with the dirty Eastern millionaires, the financial racketeers. He was the voice of the prairies speaking. He was ripping into all the betrayers of Christ and his holy principles which, it turned out, had a lot to do with the price of wheat and hogs. (37)

Later Backstrom adopts Applecart's imagery in his own political speeches. In particular, Backstrom associates the "east" with a decadent modernity, castigating "The grabbers from Toronto who never worked a day in their lives [...] They throw big booze parties and tell each other what a dandy crew they are" (110). As Lears points out, the binary opposition between hard working country folk and urban

“luxury” has been a central tenet of American antimodernism for centuries, dating back as far as the Puritan era in the United States (61). By using this imagery, Kroetsch taps into the resources of a long-existent strain of North American antimodernism.

In his unpublished novel *When Sick for Home* Kroetsch clearly positions rural Alberta as a place with an “audile-tactile” culture that is under threat from the technologies associated with modernity. This trait continues to be evident in *The Words of My Roaring*. If Kroetsch’s response to Alberta culture is translated into McLuhan’s terminology, it is clear that he highlights the negative impact of the “hot” medium of radio on the “cool” populace of rural Alberta. His protagonist Johnnie Backstrom ultimately rejects the “hot,” single-sense medium of radio in favour of the “cool,” audile-tactile medium of personal speech. When the party leader John George Applecart makes speeches on the radio he uses a hot medium that does not allow participation. Any questions that he asks are rhetorical, such as “Who is that red beast of a Who-er?” (34) that turns out to be the Toronto financial establishment. By the end of the novel Backstrom has learned that it is better to speak ‘in person,’ providing his community with a mixture of visual and aural sensation, and also allowing the audience to participate. Radio, according to Kroetsch’s anti-technological value system, is worse than personal speech. Significantly, Backstrom’s discovery of his own voice is linked to the destruction of his radio: “I struck that old Atwater-Kent a blow that would have brained an ox” (96).

Unlike Applecart, whose speeches are delivered solely through the medium of radio, Backstrom interacts with his prospective constituents in person. His first major success as a political speaker occurs at the archetypal Western event of a stampede, which is one of the venues for western orality highly praised by Kroetsch in “The

Moment of the Discovery of America Continues.” Backstrom’s complete sensory immersion in the event is indicated by his pronouncement that “I’m not ashamed to say that somehow or other I enjoy the smell of horseshit once in a while. It’s wholesome smelling” (104), and his description of the stillness of the air, “No wind, nothing; not a breeze” (108). However, the speech that he gives at the stampede makes it clear that Backstrom has internalised Applecart’s message, and is therefore not yet free from the yoke of the radio that he has recently smashed. He leaps into the arena to aid a rodeo clown who has been badly gored by a bull.¹¹ When the clown is stretchered off, Backstrom makes a speech in front of the stampede audience, drawing parallels between the scene they have just witnessed and a vision from Revelation 13.12: “And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon” (108). It is significant that both Backstrom and Applecart make use of biblical imagery. Backstrom says that he has not only read the Bible, but also had it read to him as a child (36). When read aloud, the Bible is a written text masquerading as orality. Although Applecart uses biblical pronouncements in his speech, the Bible itself is part of the Gutenberg technology of print, and is therefore seen as negative according to Kroetsch’s value system.

Saturated with the hot content of the Bible as disseminated via the hot medium of radio, Backstrom is initially guilty of parroting Applecart’s propagandistic messages. Echoing Applecart’s sermons, he likens the goring of the clown by the bull to the audience’s experience at the hands of the “plutocrat millionaires from the East” (109). Furthermore, he connects his opponent, the Ontario-born Doc Murdoch with

¹¹ Backstrom refers to himself as a clown in the speech that he delivers at the stampede (112). In a text published two years before *The Words of My Roaring* McLuhan suggests that clowns are examples of “integral men”: “The acrobat acts as a specialist, using only a limited segment of his faculties. The clown is the integral man who mimes the acrobat in an elaborate drama of incompetence” (*Understanding Media* 183). While it is unclear whether Kroetsch had read this text when writing *The Words of My Roaring*, it is significant that Backstrom’s identification with the clown is part of the process that leads to him becoming an integral man by the end of the book.

the eastern establishment, vilifying Murdoch by telling his audience “that the one thing worse than a high-muckie-muck is a minion of the same” (111). As part of his development in the course of the novel, Backstrom learns not to put his trust in propaganda. He discovers through person-to-person conversation that not everyone in Ontario is wealthy, and that his opponent Murdoch had once been poor (200). Significantly, he achieves this insight by privileging “cool” conversation over “hot” radio broadcasts, indicating that his turn away from the technologies of modernity has benefited his overall perception of the world. Once again, Kroetsch reinforces his antimodern stance.

Johnnie Backstrom’s orality connects him with the tall tale tradition that Kroetsch values highly because of its association with rural prairie culture. In his description of Alberta’s weather, Backstrom uses exaggeration to emphasize his point: “the wind blows black, when it’s dry, you drive all day with your lights on. Great electioneering weather. The fish lose their gills in this country. The gophers come up for a bite to eat, and they crawl right into the air” (53). Like Louie Cormier and Jake Lang, the “integral men” of *When Sick for Home*, Johnnie Backstrom is a habitu  of the local beer parlour. He uses the Coulee Hill beer parlour as a venue for electioneering (10-11), buying the customers rounds of beer and announcing that his rival “Duncan Murdoch, M.D. [...] would not be man enough to walk into a beer parlor and buy *himself* a glass of beer” (11). Later, when Backstrom visits another prairie bar after the stampede where he has delivered his first major speech, Kroetsch’s description emphasizes the way that the place engages every sense:

Money wouldn’t buy a chair in that beer parlor. It was jammed to the rafters; the tables almost disappeared under the heaps of bodies. Smoke shut out the light, and the stink at first was breath-taking; the stench of spilled beer and

cigarettes and sweating people, some of them cowboys; customers jam-packed into a swarming room. It took your eyes a minute to adjust, after the glare outside on the sidewalk. The noise was deafening. (117)

Ultimately, it is not the radio broadcasts of his party leader Applecart that win the election for Backstrom, but rather his own orality, particularly his ability to ‘spin a yarn.’ Having heckled Murdoch by making a flippant promise that he will deliver rain by the election day, he embellishes and exaggerates his remark in a beer parlour, conforming to the prairie tall tale tradition: “Hell, yes. Sure I said it’ll rain. I promise you that, you clodhoppers. You prairie chickens. And when it’s so goddamned wet you can’t drive to the polling booths, I hope you’ll be man enough to walk, wade or swim so you can make a cross for John Backstrom” (15). Following this outburst, “Things seemed to bust loose” as “People started talking to each other” (15). As people talk, Backstrom’s prediction gets repeated, and gains a life of its own. Later he is stunned when an old lady asks him “What day exactly do we expect the rain?” during a meeting (35).

Although the rain actually does arrive, it is significant that Kroetsch uses imagery foreshadowing the validity of Backstrom’s promise in a sequence that highlights his protagonist’s sensory integration with the landscape of Alberta, as he urinates by the side of a road:

Man, it felt good, just to be half-loaded and the pressure easing up in your bladder and the old tool held firmly in the right hand. For that one beautiful moment you feel you’ve spent a lifetime looking for a place to pee, and here you’ve found it. We watered the parched earth [...] That clear sky above all rashed over with millions of stars and the baked earth letting out the breath it had held all day; the cowshit and buckbrush and a drying slough hole scenting

the air; a little rank yet fertile with hope. It felt good. Giving yourself a flick or two (16-17)

Backstrom's connection with the natural world involves sensations bordering on the erotic: he deliberately limits himself to just *two* flicks of his penis because, as a companion points out, "Three is playing" (17). The passage blends "earthy" qualities with a lyrical response to nature.

Besides his valorization of nature, throughout the novel Kroetsch's anti-technological stance against modernity is evident from the negative qualities that he associates with the technologies of the radio and the motorcar.¹² In one incident Kroetsch highlights the dangerous intersection of the beer parlour and the automobile when Backstrom has a car accident following an evening of drinking, crashing his hearse and breaking his friend Jonah's arm, thereby inadvertently causing Jonah's suicide later in the novel (21). Kroetsch's rural-agrarian bias towards "organic" unity of man and nature leads him to depict automobiles as vehicles of destruction: a motif that appears in many of his subsequent novels, most significantly in *Alibi*. As well as being physically destructive, according to McLuhan cars can also unbalance the relationship between the senses: consisting of "an enclosed space," the car divorces its driver from the sensory environment outside it (*Understanding Media* 327). It is significant that the final sequence of the novel takes place in an unenclosed, un-motorized vehicle – a horse and cart – rather than in a motorcar. The evening before the vote, Backstrom foregoes his final night of canvassing in order to go the home of an impoverished farmer whose baby has been delivered stillborn by Doc Murdoch. As a result of the rains, the hearse gets stuck in the mud, and the farmer has to harness a wagon for Murdoch and Backstrom to return to town. On their way back to town by

¹² Furthermore, Backstrom reveals that his father died in the First World War, a conflict strongly associated with technological modernity (23).

horse and cart in the pouring rain, families bringing food stop the political rivals. Kroetsch provides detailed accounts of the people who make Backstrom and Murdoch offerings of food in spite of their poverty: “‘We came home to do the chores,’ the husband said. He didn’t want us to think they couldn’t afford to attend a sports day” (201). They also are brought cocoa by a family who has “two little kids who just wanted to see” Backstrom: “Little pale kids who looked thin and sickly shivering down there beside the wagon wheel, their big eyes staring” (203). The horse and cart – a slow, open, traditional form of transport – enables Backstrom to achieve a sense of empathy and integration with the people of his constituency in a way denied to him by the fast, enclosed automobile.

By privileging the horse and cart over the automobile, Kroetsch signals his reaction against modernity. Ultimately a sympathetic figure, Johnnie Backstrom contrasts markedly with Michael Hornyak, the representative of a destructive modernity in *But We Are Exiles*, who glorifies in highways and speeding automobiles. In *The Words of My Roaring* Kroetsch valorizes the pastoral, indicating that rural Canada is a place where one can achieve a sense of organic wholeness, through a re-valuing of the audile-tactile senses. In the novel’s final pages, Backstrom drives the horse and cart to the town of Coulee Hill, where he is expected at a pre-election rally, thinking about the speech he is about to deliver: “‘Rain,’ I would have to begin, the flags stilled about me; the crowd tense and waiting. I’d be soaked to the skin [...] It was blistering cold in the wet night, I have never been so alone. But I had a duty and I couldn’t stop; somehow I would have to begin, ‘My dear friends, rain ...’” (211). Rejecting his initial idea of delivering a biblically-inspired rehashing of Applecourt’s ideas, all that Backstrom wants to do is to refer to the all-encompassing, sensory environment of the downpour that will embrace him and his audience in a moment of

organic unity: “hundreds of people, running and waving and cheering in the rain” (212).

In fact, although Kroetsch writes about the poverty and problems resulting from the Great Depression with great empathy in *The Words of My Roaring*, ultimately he displays an ambivalent attitude to its effects. While he clearly abhors the hunger and despair caused by the combination of economic troubles and drought, on another level he hints that the Depression purifies and cleanses Alberta’s population of the trappings of modernity. For example, cars that people can’t afford to run are hooked up to teams of horses (49), the animal which epitomizes the value of rural tradition in Kroetsch’s anti-modern schema, echoing their significance in *When Sick for Home* and anticipating their crucial role in the later novel *The Studhorse Man*.¹³ In another sequence a farmer auctions off his agricultural machinery to “beat a mortgage company” (76). By drawing attention to this incident, Kroetsch indicates that the problems of rural Alberta during the Depression were caused in part by the desire of farmers to buy expensive new machinery, thereby becoming dependent on the urban financiers who provide them with mortgages. This being said, the emphasis that Kroetsch puts on external forces, whether Eastern bankers or the weather itself, portrays these farmers as complicit victims rather than the agents of modernization postulated in Bantje’s reflections on prairie modernity. In this reading, the Great Depression is a necessary evil, as it puts the coming of modernity to rural Alberta on hold. Kroetsch’s next novel, *The Studhorse Man*, is set during the Second World War, when wartime prosperity has brought about the modernization that has been delayed by the Depression in the 1930s.

¹³Kroetsch suggests that riding a horse is tactile experience bordering on the erotic, as indicated by Doc Murdoch’s first horse-ride, when he is pressed into action on his arrival in Notikeewin to assist at the birth of Backstrom. This event is Murdoch’s first delivery, “And the first time I rode a horse,” “He put a hand to his own genitals, rubbing, touching carefully here and there” (23).

While *But We Are Exiles* and *The Words of My Roaring* are set in very different places and environments, both novels clearly demonstrate Kroetsch's longing to reject modernity. Throughout each of these texts, he associates mechanical technologies with destruction. Both narratives conclude with the image of the protagonist within a vehicle that predates the modern era – a canoe in *But We Are Exiles*, and a horse and cart in *The Words of My Roaring* – experiencing the effects of the weather through all their senses. The central characters in each of these novels typifies the reaction against modernized society that is a constant preoccupation in Kroetsch's work, and that comprises an important strand of both European and North American aesthetic modernism. Writing about the early twentieth century, Lears describes antimodernism as “the recoil from an ‘overcivilized’ modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience” (xv). In Peter Guy, the “college man” (101) turned riverboat pilot from *But We Are Exiles*, Kroetsch constructs a late twentieth century figure who epitomizes the “physical” experience of antimodernism by his embracing of manual labour and a harsh wilderness existence. Johnnie Backstrom represents Kroetsch's version of the “spiritual” aspect of antimodernism, as he abandons the message of his party leader in order to participate in an “‘organic’ community of face-to-face relationships” (Lears 64). Variations on these figures continue to appear throughout Kroetsch's works of fiction, emphasizing the core theme of antimodernism that lies at the heart of his writing.

Chapter 4: *The Studhorse Man, Gone Indian and Badlands*

In his first two published novels *But We Are Exiles* and *The Words of My Roaring*, Kroetsch continues to exhibit the technophobic stance against modernity evident in his early, unpublished novel *When Sick for Home*. In this chapter, I explore *The Studhorse Man* (1969), *Gone Indian* (1973) and *Badlands* (1975), the novels most strongly connected with Kroetsch's reputation as a postmodern writer. While these novels display more self-reflexivity than the earlier texts, they also demonstrate Kroetsch's continuing resistance to modernity. For Kroetsch, twentieth-century Canadians must learn from the negative experience of the mechanical age, instead taking inspiration from the antimodern ideals of rural and tribal life. Unlike McLuhan, who idealizes the simultaneity and organic unity heralded by the move from the mechanical to the electronic age, Kroetsch views all modern technologies as symptomatic of modernization and, therefore, of the removal of humanity from an organic wholeness of existence and an integral state of being that he associates with pre-modern existence.

From 1961 to 1978, Kroetsch taught in the English department of the State University of New York at Binghamton, although towards the end of this period he also spent time as writer-in-residence at the Canadian universities of Calgary, Lethbridge and Manitoba. While teaching American literature and contemporary writing at Binghamton, Kroetsch had a professional interest in postmodern fiction written in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, and also encountered several of its practitioners. He became aware of the self-reflexive fiction of authors such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, William Gass and Robert Coover, with whom he indicates his familiarity in an interview with Geoffrey Hancock (35). His

published journals reveal that he met with John Barth and William Gass, both of whom gave readings at Binghamton during his tenure.¹ In an unpublished letter to Jim Snyder, Kroetsch describes John Barth in particular as a major literary figure, and remarks that Barth's ideas about contemporary fiction were much discussed and debated at Binghamton at this time. Among Kroetsch's colleagues at Binghamton was William Spanos, who has remarked that his personal influences at the time included Pynchon, Barth and Coover ("Retrieving" 189). Together, Kroetsch and Spanos founded and jointly edited *boundary 2: a journal of postmodern literature*, first published in 1972.

The influence of American postmodernism is evident in the three novels discussed in this chapter, problematizing the myth of an autochthonous Canadian postmodernism articulated in Kroetsch's articles "A Canadian Issue" and "Disunity as Unity." However, while Kroetsch reveals his awareness of self-reflexive American fiction in his interview with Hancock, in the conversations with Neuman and Wilson recorded in *Labyrinths of Voice*, and in his journals, he also distances himself from several of these writers. He criticises Barth for letting "parody get out of hand" (*Labyrinths* 109), and suggests that Barthelme's literary experimentation leads to "dead ends," or "stories [that] can only be written once" (Hancock 33). What is most interesting is that Kroetsch reacts against these writers because of their extreme focus on textuality, or as Raymond Federman has put it, the idea that fiction is "no longer [...] a representation of something exterior to it, but self-representation" ("Surfiction" 11). In conversation with Diane Bessai, Kroetsch establishes a distinction between writers including Barth, Gass and Coover for whom "the connection between the word and world is gone" (210), and the Canadian novelist Sheila Watson, for whom

¹ Kroetsch mentions a visit by Gass to Binghamton in March 1973 in "Towards an Essay" (146-7), and in *The Crow Journals* he notes Barth's visit to the campus in May 1974 (18).

“the situation is more blatantly ambiguous” (210). He praises Watson for maintaining a connection with “the oral tradition,” a connection that Kroetsch suggests enables reference to the world outside the text, as “we are reminded of the ground” (211). In his interview with Hancock, Kroetsch highlights his sense that, besides his immediate academic environment, he is influenced by what he calls the “non-intellectual,” “terribly rural” world (36). He emphasizes the importance that he attaches to growing up in “a landscape in which people were farming, or coal mining, or ranching,” (all of which might be considered ‘integral’ occupations to use McLuhan’s terminology) and once again draws attention to the “oral tradition” that was the mainstay of his rural Alberta childhood (36). In doing so, he associates himself with the oral culture of the rural environment, underplaying the influence of American literary postmodernism which Hancock had previously mentioned, and unconsciously signalling his participation in antimodernist tradition (35).

The Studhorse Man, *Gone Indian* and *Badlands* represent Kroetsch’s most sustained engagement with the idea of writing about writing, and his incorporation of metafictional elements into his novels. Like the American postmodernists, Kroetsch endeavours to use the printed word to interrogate the use of this medium to shape the world outside the book. But while American postmodernists such as Federman and Barth call for writers to highlight the textuality of their fiction – to write “novels which imitate the form of the Novel,” as Barth describes his own works (168) – Kroetsch includes self-reflexive elements within his novels in order to critique the emphasis placed on the printed word in modernized culture. In doing so he aims to re-privilege orality over textuality, and the audile-tactile over the visual sense.

Linda Hutcheon outlines the appeal of metafiction to late twentieth century writers in Canada in *The Canadian Postmodern*: “In their self-reflexivity, Canadian

postmodern novels offer yet another example of the self-consciousness or ‘meta-’ sensibility of our times, that is, of the awareness that all our systems of understanding are deliberate and historically significant constructs (not natural and eternal givens)” (x). The logic behind Kroetsch’s use of metafiction is that narratives, and particularly those in print form, can be deceptive: by presenting what is merely a sequence of fragments as a unified whole, conventional linear narratives can persuade the reader into accepting one viewpoint as the only “correct,” authoritative version. Kroetsch’s preoccupation with the impact of written narrative on the description of both historical and contemporary events is manifested in his fiction and essays. In his own criticism, Kroetsch shows that he is wary of history, in particular the ways in which histories have been written to exclude. In “Disunity as Unity,” Kroetsch argues that “History, in its traditional forms, insisted too strongly on coherent narrative,” stressing his mistrust of the potential use of history as unifying metanarrative (24).²

By using metafictional devices, Kroetsch draws attention to the way that writing can be used manipulatively in order to create an illusion of a singular version of events that serves a particular purpose. However, in doing so, he also amplifies the distinction between the written word, which he associates with modernity and therefore artificiality, and orality, which he considers to be an authentic mode of discourse associated with the antimodern rural environment. In her study of metafiction, Patricia Waugh argues that it “explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism, it does not ignore or abandon them,” so that “realistic conventions often supply the ‘control’ in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves” (18). The metafictional elements

² While Kroetsch rejects the idea of conventional history as a “metanarrative,” in the same essay he offers – albeit unconsciously – the story of Louis Riel’s 1885 rebellion as an alternative metanarrative to that of technological progress, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Therefore, while Kroetsch purports to endorse Lyotard’s suggestion that to be “postmodern” is to be suspicious of grand narratives, at the same time he suggests that Riel’s story has become a Canadian metanarrative.

in the novels explored in this chapter, as well as his subsequent works of fiction, operate in a manner opposite to that proposed by Waugh. In Kroetsch's self-reflexive writings, realistic elements are foregrounded against a background of metafictional experimentation, just as within his novels moments of 'authenticity' – immersion in the wilderness, the rural landscape, or the earth – are highlighted in contrast with the artificial environments associated with modernity.³

In *The Studhorse Man* Kroetsch returns to a theme central to *When Sick for Home*, the destruction of traditional Alberta ways of life by modernization and mechanization. In this novel, the narrator Demeter Proudfoot attempts to write the story of the final months of a studhorse man, Hazard Lepage, which coincide with the closing period of the Second World War. Both the protagonist and narrator strive to maintain the organic harmony of humanity and nature – epitomized by respect for horses – in the face of modernization that threatens to destroy it. Hazard Lepage embodies Kroetsch's antimodern rural-pastoral ideal, although there is a certain ambiguity about his response to nature. While Hazard wishes to preserve the importance of the horse despite the advent of the mechanical age, he also desires to interfere with nature in order to breed "the perfect horse" (20).⁴ In the closing pages of the novel, the stallion Poseidon kills Hazard, kicking out in a reaction against Hazard's attempts to control him. Therefore, although the studhorse man is a figure of resistance against the move "from a horse economy to a mechanical world," as

³ In making this reading, I go against the grain of critical responses to Kroetsch's self-reflexivity (including Martin Kuester's "Tales Told in the Bathtub: Robert Kroetsch's Historiographic Metafiction," P.L. Surette's "The Fabular Fiction of Robert Kroetsch," Louis MacKendrick's "Robert Kroetsch and the Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion," and Walter Pache's "'The Fiction Makes Us Real': Aspects of Postmodernism in Canada"), which do not adequately distinguish Kroetsch's continuing preoccupation with orality from the more celebratory responses to the "textuality" of the text displayed by many of his American counterparts.

⁴ In actuality, selective breeding of livestock is an ancient practice, but significantly, within *The Studhorse Man* Kroetsch associates the desire to perfect the horse with modernity. Also in this text, there are connotations of eugenics in the name of Eugene Utter, the character who continues Hazard's horse-breeding activities after his death.

Kroetsch describes this transitional period (“A Conversation with Margaret Laurence” 56), he is implicated in the desire for progress that Kroetsch associates with modernization. While Hazard is Kroetsch’s vision of a “natural,” integral man in some respects, he also represents the betrayal of the antimodernist ideal. Significantly, Kroetsch constructs Hazard’s death in a manner that highlights the negative consequences resulting from interfering with nature, represented by the stallion’s sexual desire.⁵

Demeter Proudfoot, the narrator of *The Studhorse Man*, writes his narrative in the mental asylum to which he has been confined since Hazard’s death: his madness signals the ultimate fragmentation of the “schizophrenic” Gutenberg man, to echo McLuhan’s phrase (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 23). Demeter feels that he can call the studhorse man Hazard Lepage back with “pencil and paper,” making him live again through words (153). His slavish attention to detail is exemplified by this description:

Thus it was that on Thursday, March eighth, Hazard Lepage got out of bed three hours earlier than usual – he was sleeping in his fifth bed, the significance of which I shall explore later – made his porridge and tea, combed his hair and beard, put on his overshoes and mackinaw and fur cap, and precisely at 8:15 he went outside to dig a hole in the snowbank covering his recently accumulated pile of bones. (8)

This passage contains precise details, including times, indicating the orderliness and accuracy of Demeter’s narration. However, Kroetsch undermines the illusion of reality created by Demeter’s amassed detail by having his narrator interrupt the supposed “factual” text with details about his own input into the construction of the

⁵ Furthermore, although Hazard is generally associated with orality, he is also connected with the Gutenberg technology of the printed word. Demeter announces that “Hazard loved to read. His poetry and philosophy were a leatherbound stained ancient collection called *The General Stud Book*” (9). An account of the lineages of eighteenth century horses, the repeated references to this book within the text foreground the idea of interference with nature represented by the desire to breed “the perfect horse.”

narrative. For example, Demeter offers a lyrical description of the effect of spring coming to Alberta: “the scent of spring was in that yeasty wind, the high raw odor of mares and spring—” (12) before interrupting himself: “Already I find myself straying from the mere facts. I distort. I must control a certain penchant for gentleness and beauty. Hazard did not say ‘mares and spring.’ We were chatting together on the ranch where I finally caught up with him and he said in his crude way, ‘That raw bitch of a wind was full of crocuses and snatch’” (12).⁶ In this example, Kroetsch deliberately highlights the alterations that Demeter has made, amendments that dilute the earthy, tactile, orality of Hazard’s spoken words. The implication is that Hazard’s oral language, with its beer-parlour profanities and tall-tale idiom, is more “authentic” than Demeter’s bowdlerized vocabulary.

Kroetsch foregrounds the idea of representation by highlighting the alterations and emendations made by Demeter in his account of Hazard’s life. Throughout the text Kroetsch emphasizes the possibility that all forms of visual representation – whether in print or pictorial art – are reductive versions of that which they seek to represent. Demeter ruminates on the conflict between representation and reality when he explores his own failure to describe Poseidon in words. In thrall to visual media, he urges his readers to refer to ancient Chinese art for some idea of what the stallion was like (134). At the same time, he draws parallels with his own attempt to write the history of Hazard, saying, “Ah, where to begin? Why is the truth never where it should be? Is the truth of the man in the man or in his biography? Is the truth of the beast in the flesh and confusion or in the few skilfully arranged lines?” (134). The living “flesh” is “confusion,” therefore it is multiple and complex; the “realistic” representation is an ordering reduction.

⁶ Other examples of Kroetsch’s use of metafictional devices in *The Studhorse Man* are summarized in Hutcheon’s *The Canadian Postmodern* (164), and in Martin Kuester’s “Kroetsch’s Fragments: Approaching the Narrative Structure of His Novels” (143).

At the climax of the novel Demeter chooses the confusion of life over the orderliness of art, attempting to take over Hazard's role as horse breeder. Towards the end of the novel he steals Hazard's stallion Poseidon and Martha Proudfoot's mares, determined to keep the prairie tradition of horse-breeding alive in defiance of the mechanization of Alberta's rural economy. In this sequence, Kroetsch reiterates a key antimodern trope that Lears dates back to the late nineteenth century: the desire for members of an educated elite who believe that they have "experienced life second hand, in books rather than action" to rediscover "the opportunity for bodily testing provided by rural life" (48). The central characters of the other novels discussed in this chapter – *Gone Indian's* Jeremy Sadness and *Badlands's* Anna Dawe – are further examples of the occurrence of this theme in Kroetsch's work. Once again, while Kroetsch devalues the metanarrative of modernization, he installs a privileged antimodern alternative in its place. During Demeter's brief period as "D. Proudfoot, Studhorse Man," he experiences the rural-pastoral environment as an audile-tactile paradise: "I was happy then [...] The horses waded to their thighs in roses. I ate red raspberries off a bush. Without so much as dismounting I milked the chokecherries off a branch and into my mouth. And I wondered if I had always been happy" (156). This pastoral interlude is, I argue, an instance when Kroetsch presents a moment of antimodern "authenticity" in such a manner that it is foregrounded against a backdrop of literary self-reflexivity. By segueing from Demeter's description of his pastoral idyll into a series of extracts from *The General Stud Book* (157), Kroetsch highlights the artificial order imposed on the natural world within the pages of this intertext.

Barricading himself into Hazard's mansion, Demeter sees off various mechanical foes, including several cars and a bicycle (165). He shoots and injures his uncle Tad (167), which is a particularly significant act as Tad is complicit with the

modernization of Alberta. Early in the novel, when buying bones for the war effort, Tad tells Hazard that his horses are only worth anything dead: “Throw in the team [...] and I’ll make it ten. But you’ll have to provide your own shotgun and shells” (13). Tad is among the novel’s more unsympathetic characters, as he is rampantly opportunistic and obsessed with the latest technology and unrepentant about what is being lost as a result of mechanization. His sons, Demeter’s cousins, are connected with the pollution and destruction of nature: hunting for coyotes, they burn automobile tyres to make smoke to flush the animals out of their hiding places, “whereupon the frantic animals [are] shot or at least shot at with shotguns amid great excitement and hilarity” (117). Kroetsch signals his distaste for these characters through his use of shocking imagery, as a coyote is described “bleeding badly and trailing a yard or two of intestine” (117). In their indiscriminate slaughter one of Hazard’s horses is killed and Hazard himself is shot (119-20). Ironically, while Hazard is saved by Marie Eshpeter, the owner of a local ranch, she provides another example of the negative impact of modernity on nature, as she collects the semen of Hazard’s stallion Poseidon by means of an “artificial vagina” (137). The detail given about the precise specifications of this device (for example, its construction and its optimum operating temperatures) highlight its artificiality, emphasizing the gulf between the earthy, tactile nature valued by Kroetsch in this and his earlier novels, and the eclipse of the natural in the modern era by mechanization and industrialization (137).

Kroetsch’s privileging of rural tradition, which he perceives to be threatened by a mechanistic and destructive modernity, is most clearly signalled by a sequence in which Hazard frees hundreds of horses from an Edmonton stockyard while searching for his missing stallion Poseidon. While Demeter draws attention to the veneration

given to the horse by prehistoric peoples, referring to the cave paintings of Lascaux dating back “some 15,000 years” (141), in the modern era, horses have been devalued. Prior to being set loose, the horses in the Edmonton stockyard were “destined for the barrel, can or box, destined to feed the dogs and cats of this fat and ungrateful nation” (27). As a result of Hazard’s liberation of the horses, the natural world returns to the heart of the city. Demeter comments, “It has been argued that to this day a few wild horses survive in the coulees and ravines of the North Saskatchewan River, there in the heart of the city of Edmonton” (27). The release of the horses into the city leads to bizarre occurrences wherein the natural confronts the artificial. At one point Hazard inquires about the whereabouts of Poseidon at a department store: “He ducked into Woodward’s and asked a girl at the perfume counter if she had seen a big blue stallion come in. ‘Only a pair of grays,’ the girl replied, pointing to where a floorwalker was cleaning up horse turds with a feather duster. ‘They went towards lingerie’” (28). The contrast between excrement and perfume is a comic distillation of Kroetsch’s antipathy for the artifices of modernity. In other ways, the horses bring modern technology to a standstill, enabling oral culture to return to the city as “Stranded cars were parked every which way in the drifts; motionless buses and streetcars gave shelter to groups of singing students, to picnicking stenographers who could not find seats in the crowded restaurants” (28).

The incursion of disorder into the city resulting from Hazard’s setting loose of the horses also impacts on Demeter’s narration of the events. In the midst of the sequence devoted to Hazard’s experiences in Edmonton, there are several self-reflexive passages in which Demeter discusses his difficulties in creating an ordered narrative from the fragmentary materials available to him. He quotes from the note-cards upon which he has compiled his source materials through oral interviews with

Hazard, but draws the reader's attention to the way that he has arranged the cards "so as to suggest an order that was not necessarily present in Hazard's rambling conversation" (40). By drawing attention to the artificiality of the order imposed on events by Demeter as a historian, Kroetsch foregrounds the subjective presence of the author behind all seemingly transparent historical narratives. The note-cards detailing Hazard's recovery of Poseidon and his escape from Edmonton are initially presented verbatim (40-1), but are then constructed into a coherent narrative by Demeter in the following pages, and are altered in the process (41-5). Louis MacKendrick comments that Demeter's citation of his own note-cards "make suspect his reconstruction, or imagination, of Hazard's original activity," as "Limited shorthand facts are translated into wholesale 'biography', whose slender authentication more properly shows the living man, Hazard, being reconstructed in a fiction" (20). While this is a crucial point, I feel MacKendrick misreads Kroetsch by suggesting that an 'academic' historian, who might provide more than the "slender authentication" than Demeter offers, could create a written narrative that represents Hazard's life accurately. In actuality, Kroetsch is critiquing more than the "factual" genre of historical writing. For Kroetsch, all writing that creates an illusion of wholeness, thereby evoking a sense of fixity, is suspect. His imagery links the alphabet with fixation and death, foreshadowing concerns that will re-emerge in the later novel *What the Crow Said*. Demeter describes an Edmonton cemetery in winter, remarking that "the tree-sifted snow [was] softly burying the stones on which I studied my alphabet" (29). By using metafictional techniques, Kroetsch aims to lay bare the illusion of completeness conventionally evoked in print narratives, thereby allowing him to expose the fragmented and limited perspectives of their authors. For example, Demeter describes a predicament that befalls Hazard and Utter, and then announces:

I have some bad news, my patient reader. The bald truth is, I have not the foggiest notion how the two men got out of their fix [...] Hazard refused to explain what happened next. I begged him in the interest of logic, of continuity, in the need to instruct and direct future generations, to give me a clue. (99)

This evidence of incompleteness reinforces the impression of antimodern “authenticity” carefully constructed in Kroetsch’s text. Orderly, sequential narrative signals the artificial completeness or textual closure valued in the Gutenberg era; therefore, paradoxically, the existence of narrative gaps evokes a sense of “authenticity” that can counter the illusion of wholeness presented in conventional texts. Kroetsch’s use of the metafictional devices typically associated with postmodernism signals his longing to escape from the orderliness that he associates with the modern world, locating his work within Canadian antimodern tradition.

Demeter’s desire to impose sequential order onto the events of Hazard’s life correlates with one of the aspects of the modern, Gutenberg era decried by Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan points out the dangers involved in the imposition of such sequencing, which, he argues, is analogous with the separation and division of tasks that takes place in the process of mechanization, leading to the perception of human beings as nothing more than machines (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 174). However, Kroetsch also attacks the dehumanising impact of other technologies besides the printing press in *The Studhorse Man*. He suggests that humanity’s organic relationship with the world is under threat as a result of technological advances. In trying to preserve the occupation of “studhorse man” Demeter Proudfoot is trying to conserve an idyllic rural environment against the threat of modernization. As A.R. Kizuk points out, the stallion Poseidon’s sperm is first collected for the purpose of artificial insemination

on the day of the dropping of the Hiroshima bomb, August 6 1945 (61). Demeter feels that the world is tumbling into decadence and destruction as a result of modernization. After Hazard's death, his studhorse Poseidon becomes a crucial element in Alberta's new economy, the industrial-scale farming of mares for the production of pregnant mare's urine (PMU) to provide ingredients for the contraceptive pill that, as Demeter puts it, will allow "Scurrilous, barbarous, stinking man [...] to screw himself into oblivion, to erase himself like a rotting pestilence from the face of God's creation" (174). The description of the PMU farms in Alberta indicate the negative impact of modernity on nature, as horses are factory-farmed for the benefit of modern science:

Each barn contains an average of fifty mares, standing in two neat rows that face each other, harnessed with an ingenious device not unlike a cornucopia so that their urine might run through long clear sterilized tubes under their bellies, then be collected in neat square one-gallon plastic containers (173).

Even horse urine is sterilized and commodified by the technologies of modernity, as Demeter's account of the PMU industry indicates.

A mechanized, sterile world is at odds with the ideal of the organic, tactile union of humanity and nature treasured by Kroetsch. As in his previous novels, Kroetsch places immense value on the tactile sense in *The Studhorse Man*. At several points in the novel, touch is demonstrated to be healing, and even life-giving. The sculptor P. Cockburn massages Hazard's injured back in the museum of the legislative building in Alberta (32). The Cree who saves Hazard's first colt from drowning "massage[s] the colt's heart" (68). Hazard also gives life by touching the colt: "he picked up his mackinaw and knelt and began rubbing fiercely at the colt's pale blue silky coat" (69). Towards the end of the novel, when Hazard is believed to have died, his fiancée Martha Proudfoot revives him through the sense of touch,

handling his penis, “hoping she might massage life back into death itself” (153). When Hazard awakens, “In the chill hush of that August night she was all love and pity and concern, warming his naked body with her hands and kisses” (154). It is not just human-to-human touch that Kroetsch values, but also the envelopment of people by the earth itself. It is clear that in the following description of Hazard and his travelling companion Eugene Utter, Kroetsch is expressing his nostalgia for a time when people got their hands and feet dirty and were connected with the natural world in a tactile sense, even as modern technologies began to encroach: “Quite naturally, their wedding clothes soon became dusty and unkempt. Passing trucks more than once spattered the two men with mud. Their shoes and socks came to resemble the earth itself” (174). *The Studhorse Man* is an antimodern lament for a passing way of life. Kroetsch highlights the negative aspects of modernity and its technologies, aiming to encourage his readers to be aware of lifestyles from the past that provide positive alternatives to the mechanization of the world.

Indigenous peoples represent one such alternative way of life. Like the Native riverboat pilot Jonas Bird and the Inuit trapper Lawrence Firth in *But We Are Exiles*, Canada’s aboriginal people appear in *The Studhorse Man* as figures connected with the natural world. Hazard obtains his first colt when he aids a Cree who is rescuing it from the waters of Wildfire Lake (68). In Kroetsch’s next novel, *Gone Indian*, he explores the connection between Native peoples and the natural world through the character Jeremy Sadness, who seeks to achieve a sense of organic unity with the environment by adopting an “Indian” identity. However, while Kroetsch clearly connects Canada’s indigenous peoples with the sensory harmony of humanity and nature, he does so by associating Natives with the past, in the form of a pre-modern time that stands in contradistinction to the modern, technological era that he is

reacting against. This has the effect of removing native people from modern times, creating the impression of the fossilization of indigenous Canadian culture.

Gone Indian centres on Jeremy Sadness, an American PhD student who is sent to Alberta by his supervisor Madham for a job interview. Suffering from writer's block, he tapes the events of his journey in order to record "the meditations and insights that would help him complete his dissertation" (1). The novel takes the form of a letter from Jeremy's supervisor Professor R. Mark Madham to an Alberta woman named Jill Sunderman, with whom Jeremy had an affair before disappearing with her mother Bea. Madham claims to have transcribed "a few passages" from his student's tapes for Jill's benefit, in an attempt to explain the circumstances of Jeremy's and Bea's disappearance (1). The main body of the novel consists of these transcriptions. Chapters alternate between Jeremy's voice and Madham's, with the professor commenting on his student's words and actions.

Gone Indian is the most overtly "postmodern" novel in Kroetsch's oeuvre, demonstrating many of the features that Federman associates with "the new fictitious discourse," in which "rather than being the stable image of daily life, fiction will be in a perpetual state of redoubling upon itself. It is from itself, from its own substance that the fictitious discourse will proliferate – imitating, repeating, parodying, retracting what it says" (11). Replete with parodies (both of specific texts including the romance of Tristan and Isolde,⁷ the conservation tracts of Grey Owl,⁸ and also of the academic milieu more generally), repetitions and contradictory endings, *Gone*

⁷ Constructed within the text through the etymological connection linking Sadness and Tristan, and the name of "Mark" shared by Tristan's king and Jeremy's professor, the connection between *Gone Indian* and the legend of Tristan and Isolde is overtly signalled by Kroetsch in his self-authored blurb for the first edition ("From Tristan to Columbus to Trudeau, men have gone west in search of new loves, new worlds, new identities"). The manuscript of Kroetsch's blurb appears in his unpublished letter to Ingrid Cook.

⁸ See Sherrill E. Grace's "Kroetsch and the Semiotics of North."

Indian is Kroetsch's most self-reflexive text.⁹ However, the exploration of Kroetsch's complete novels undertaken in this thesis enables me to highlight the recurrence of antimodern elements in this formally postmodern work. *Gone Indian* represents the continuation of Kroetsch's critique of modernity. In fact, by highlighting the 'artificiality' of the written discourse privileged by the academic environment in which Professor Madham and Jeremy Sadness are participants, Kroetsch reasserts the 'authenticity' of the rural and wilderness surroundings which Jeremy finds himself immersed within in the course of the novel.

As Arnold Davidson has pointed out, hints throughout the text suggest that Professor Madham is in fact Robert Sunderman, the presumed-dead husband of Jeremy's lover Bea, who has abandoned the Canadian prairies to adopt a new existence as an academic in the United States.¹⁰ Madham has chosen the Gutenberg world over the antimodern ideal of rural life, but, like the narrator of the early story "That Yellow Prairie Sky," he reveals his nostalgia for his former life through a continued obsession with the prairies which he has left behind. The professor claims that he has sent Jeremy to Alberta "as on a mission, as on a veritable quest for something forever lost to me and yet recoverable to the world" (14). For all the self-reflexive textual play in *Gone Indian*, ultimately the novel reinforces the sense that Gutenberg men can "recover" the integral wholeness which they have lost, as long as they enter into the un-modern environment. Jeremy is initially conceived as a "Gutenberg Man" like his supervisor Madham, but he eventually comes to reject his

⁹ For a succinct synopsis of Kroetsch's many uses of repetition and imitation in his construction of *Gone Indian*'s characters, see Margaret E. Turner's "Endings Be Damned: Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*" (65-66). Arnold and Cathy Davidson concisely summarize the elements of academic parody within the text in "Crossing Boundaries: Hubert Aquin's *L'Antiphonaire* and Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian* as Fictions of the Avant-Garde," and also highlight Kroetsch's use of repetition by foregrounding the sense that Madham and Sadness function as doppelgangers (170-2).

¹⁰ See Davidson's "Will the Read R. Mark Madham Please Stand Up: A Note on Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*."

preoccupation with the printed word, railing against his “goddamned fucked-up book-spent life” (123). Like Demeter Proudfoot in *The Studhorse Man*, the characterization of Jeremy reinforces Kroetsch’s antimodern ideal of the rejection of a book-centred life in favour of the authenticity of interaction with the natural world. Echoing McLuhan’s remarks about the impact of the printing press, Kroetsch’s depiction of Jeremy suggests that obsession with print leads not only to sensory fragmentation, but also to a mode of perception which reduces other people to their constituent parts in a machine-like manner. When judging at a beauty contest, Jeremy keeps reducing the contestants to their ‘components’ as he attempts to compare the women by means of a methodical checklist: “Teeth. I made a check in each of the three columns. Hair. Check check check. Ear lobes. Check check check. Nostrils. Check check check. Jaw. Check check check. Elbows. Check check check [...] Sooner or later, one variation would have to show up” (114).

From the “prologue” of the novel in which Professor Madham explains how the text came into being, throughout the novel Kroetsch highlights the disjunction between the visual technology of print primarily connected with Madham, and the audile-tactile medium of the spoken word adopted by Jeremy Sadness in his trip to Canada. This contrast within *Gone Indian* encapsulates Kroetsch’s exploration of a “corrupt” modernity epitomized by the written word in contrast with an idealized pre-modernity linked with oral speech. In one of the few scholarly articles to explore the links between McLuhan and Kroetsch, Roderick W. Harvey has discussed *Gone Indian* in relation to the concept of the “Gutenberg Man.” Harvey suggests that “Jeremy does not seem to be any better off with his tape recorder than he would be if he had to write a book,” because “The details of his universe are fragmented and not accessible to him” (22). In contrast, I argue that Jeremy becomes an integral man via

the “audile” medium of tape recordings, abandoning his previous existence as a Gutenberg man. However, although the tape recorder may be a staging post on Jeremy’s way to organic unity, ultimately it must be abandoned as it too is a form of machinery tainted with modernity. At the end of the novel, Jeremy disappears, abandoning his modern technology. Madham remarks that “The tape recorder was discovered hanging by its strap from a bolt on a timber 144 feet *directly* above the surface of the Cree River” (151): the emphasis that he puts on “exact measurement” associates Madham with the “new passion for quantity and measurement” that McLuhan sees emerging in the post-Gutenberg era of print culture (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 168). Ultimately, Kroetsch suggests that an organically unified existence is only possible if one abandons modernity to return to nature, which is one of the explanations for Jeremy’s disappearance given towards the end of the novel (153).

In *Gone Indian* there are many references to technology that reinforce the negative impact of modernization on the world. Unlike the traditional dog-sled, snowmobiles are shown to be dangerous, as Roger Dorck, the organizer of the Notikeewin Winter Festival is revealed to be comatose following a snowmobile accident (26). Jeremy describes a snowmobile as a “mechanical devil” (39), and he is also involved in a snowmobile accident (40). Later, a train crashes into a snowmobile that Jeremy had ridden, once again revealing the destructive potentiality of the technologies of motorized transport (150). Cementing Kroetsch’s link between technology and death is the revelation that the Notikeewin train station houses a funeral parlour (127). Professor Madham suggests that his former student is “not much of a driver” (30), and Jeremy’s preference for indigenous methods of travelling, such as snowshoes, indicates his privileged position in the text as one who rejects modern technology. At one point Jeremy envisions a plane crash as “a burst of

exploding gasoline, of purifying fire” (19), seeing the elimination of technology as a cleansing act. Kroetsch alludes to “a painting of a labyrinthine airport” (11), a reference to the contemporary Canadian artist Jack Shadbolt’s mural for Edmonton Airport, “Bush Pilot in the Northern Sky.” While Sherrill E. Grace points out that Shadbolt himself sees his painting as celebrating “the ‘conquest of the north by technology’ at the same time as it explodes the romantic ‘mystic north’ of the Group [of Seven]” (“Kroetsch and the Semiotics of North” 19), I argue that in *Gone Indian* Kroetsch engages with the possibility of the conquest of technology *by* the north. In “The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition,” Kroetsch writes of the north, “We don’t want to conquer it. Sometimes we want it to conquer us” (54).

Jeremy Sadness’s participation in modernity is “conquered” by the northern landscape, in the sense that he achieves a harmonious relationship between his senses and the environment that has not been possible during his metropolitan existence. When he participates in a snowshoe race, he takes inspiration from a natural creature, a magpie, and comes first despite never having worn them before (88). During the race he feels that his sensory awareness is improving, and he likens himself to an animal: “My mind was as clear as the sky itself. I was seeing better, I recognized that: I was a free man, loping like a coyote down the river valley” (83-84). He even appears to be psychically transported to a pre-modern era: “Buffalo trails, deep ruts in the hidden earth, came down through the coulees, down to the slow river and the salt licks and the water. I swear I could smell the blood of a buffalo jump: right there in those hills the Cree and the Blackfoot drove the unknown herds to a fatal leap. Over the cliffs the buffalo lunged to the heaped bones below” (85). Furthermore, immersion in this un-modern landscape allows the erstwhile Gutenberg man to “identify the precision of [his] body,” experiencing physical sensation as “an end in

itself” (83). As Lears points out, late twentieth century antimodernism is often expressed in “the persistent desire to test oneself physically by confronting the reality of the natural world” (305). Kroetsch’s description of Jeremy Sadness’s experiences in the snow-bound rural landscape surrounding Notikeewin indicates his continued participation in the critique of modern culture that reinforces a binary opposition between the authenticity of the ex-urban environment and the artificiality of metropolitan existence.

Kroetsch goes so far as to suggest that even northern weather systems can counteract modernity. When Jeremy and Jill walk onto Edmonton’s High Level Bridge, a snowstorm eliminates the visual presence of the city around them. Madham re-imagines this incident in his correspondence with Jill, suggesting that “when you reached the middle of the bridge you were in a cloud of snow; only the rapping of the cars, their sounds echoing inside the bridge girders, gave assurance that you were not adrift in the sky” (58). As Jeremy and Jill have sex against the railing in the middle of the bridge, the description of their sexual encounter focuses on the audile-tactile aspects of their experience, as they feel “the touch of snow”, and “the horny heave, the deep rejoinder of guttural delight” (58-9). Later, Jeremy recalls their lovemaking as “The primitive self reasserting itself,” and remembers Jill’s “low preliterate outcry” (83). By associating between Jeremy and Jill’s sexual encounter with an escape from literacy and also modernity, Kroetsch continues to emphasize the connection between authenticity and primitivism that is a recurring trope throughout antimodern discourse.¹¹

¹¹ For a discussion of the connections between primitivism and antimodernism in modern art, see Fred R. Myers, “Introduction to Part One: Around and About Modernity: Some Comments on Themes of Primitivism and Modernism.”

Throughout Kroetsch's novels, the most fulfilling kind of sex is represented as creating an atmosphere of organic unity and complete sensory involvement. At the novel's outset, Jeremy's sensory balance has been so badly affected by his existence as an archetypal Gutenberg man, a literature graduate student, that he has become afflicted by a strange kind of impotence that only affects him when he is lying down. Jeremy attempts to remedy this situation by having his wife Carol read from Gibbon in bed: "Maybe. I was thinking, maybe I'm so programmed that I have to be in a learning situation" (55). Gutenberg technology contributes to several of Jeremy's sexual experiences, as he recalls encounters with a library worker "who wore short skirts, very short skirts, and who, one morning, showing me how to use a microfilm reader in the basement of the library, yielded, even there, up against the reader that she had only then switched on, to the darkest dimension of our mutual lust," and with a university secretary when he is supposed to be correcting dissertation footnotes, again in the Library Tower (115). However, although he has visual memories associated with his former lovers (one has breasts "like the Grand Tetons," another gives him the gift of a brass key ring), he is shut off from complete sensory involvement in his recollections: "the most intimate details were blanched from my watery mind" (115).

Eventually, when Jeremy makes love to Jill's mother, Bea Sunderman, he achieves the sensory harmony that has been denied to him during his period as a graduate student obsessed with the visual technology of the printed word. When Jeremy first encounters her she is sitting on Roger Dorck's bed: "Her sensuous mouth was seemingly pressed to his right ear" (27). Associated with sound and touch, Bea gives Jeremy the sensory wholeness of audile-tactile union that he craves. She is also connected with the natural world, as she has adopted the costume of a white bear

during the Notikeewin Winter Festival (70). As he is about to consummate his relationship with Bea, Jeremy associates her natural scent with soil, as he says that “She gave to the whole room the smell of earth” (147). He uses natural imagery to describe sex with Bea: “The rabbit warren. The sapsucker raiding the broken tree. The pussyfoot lair of the mountain lion [...] The diver downed. The snatching shark. The lava lapping, into the sea. At the volcano’s lip, the sweet stench, the scorched charisma of the mountainous hole” (149). Significantly, the complete sensory involvement of fulfilling sexual intercourse for Jeremy is expressed in images that evoke the harmony of an imagined union with the natural world.

Having granted his protagonist a sense of organic unity, Kroetsch does not allow him to return to the urban environment of the city. He and Bea disappear either into death or the wilderness. Jeremy’s wife Carol believes that they planted a snowmobile on the railway line, causing a train to stop, then boarded the train, escaping into the wilderness:

She would have them hop down from the train [...] With all the unbounded wilderness rolling into the north. Making a clean break into the last forest. Into a valley. Harnessing a dog team and breaking a new trail. Building a raft, floating down north on the spring break-up. Seeking the last unbroken muskrat lodge, the unfished lake of trout and jack, the circle of buffalo, bending to drink. (153)

In this vision, Jeremy and Bea abandon the trappings of modernity, the snowmobile and the train, adopting the indigenous custom of dogsledding, and entering into a wilderness untouched by modernity. While Madham disputes Carol’s version of events, the possibility is left open by the freeze-frame ending of *Gone Indian*, which finishes with an image of Jeremy and Bea leaping from the bridge where the train and

snowmobile collide (157-8). One of these outcomes – death in a collision between snowmobile and train – indicates the destructive potential of modern technology. The other – a new life in the Canadian wild – illustrates Kroetsch’s idealization of the natural world. Therefore, while Kroetsch leaves his ending open, his readers are faced with two choices that exemplify his dissatisfaction with modernity and desire for the organic wholeness of the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. Musing on the fate of Jeremy and Bea, the Gutenberg man Professor Madham reveals his fantasies of entering into the audile tactile realm: “Perhaps what really matters is the warmth each finds in the other’s body. Two bodies. The rest is fiction...” (157).

As well as through Jeremy’s relationship with Bea, Kroetsch suggests that his protagonist advances towards the goal of organic unity with the natural world by means of his contact with indigenous peoples. The key idea evoked by the phrase “gone Indian” is that of indigenization, whereby the descendents of European settlers incorporate imagery of the Native other into their colonizing culture in order to feel at home in the colony. As Terry Goldie comments, “The white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada?” (*Fear and Temptation* 12). One answer to this predicament is for the settlers to become “indigenized,” in other words, to identify themselves with Native peoples. Jeremy Sadness epitomizes this urge. A graduate student at the State University of New York at Binghamton, Jeremy ostensibly travels to Edmonton to attend a job interview arranged by Professor Madham. However, the student has an ulterior motive for his trip. He is obsessed with Grey Owl, a conservationist who produced key works on the need to preserve Canada’s natural environment during the 1930s including *The Men of the Last Frontier* (1931) and *The Adventures of Sajo and*

her Beaver People (1935). Jeremy wishes to replicate his hero's way of life, telling customs officials at Edmonton airport "I want to be Grey Owl" (6). Although Grey Owl claimed to be half-Scottish and half-Apache, on his death in 1938 he was exposed as actually having been an Englishman from Hastings named Archibald Belaney. As Madham comments, Jeremy has chosen "a model from the utmost cultivated shores of the civilised world" (6-7).

In terms of Kroetsch's antimodern preoccupations, it is significant that Jeremy chooses to identify with Grey Owl rather than a figure such as Poundmaker, Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull (all mentioned in the text [103]). Jeremy is a "child of Manhattan, born and bred" (5), and he finds his hero in a figure who rejected urban modernity for a wilderness existence, and who critiqued "the remorseless clang of modern technology" and the "destructive nature of industrialism" (Windsor, qtd. in Justin Edwards 91). Kroetsch's description of Jeremy's childhood environment in New York's Little Italy emphasizes the negative qualities of urban life, as Jeremy is bullied and victimized as the "Indian" in neighbourhood children's cowboy games, where "they threw broken bricks" (epitomizing urban decay) and "tied me up and stuck lit matches in the seams of my shoes" (94). Jeremy's discovery of Grey Owl's works enables him to see the positive aspects of being "Indian," especially an organic relationship with the natural world: "The hunter who would not, finally, hunt. The killer refusing to kill. Saving the beaver" (80). By having Jeremy adulate Grey Owl, rather than an actual indigene, Kroetsch offers a role model whose life-story suggests that North America's European settlers can actively reject being part of modernized society.

Nevertheless, a paradox emerges from Jeremy's idolization of Grey Owl, who rejected European civilization only to achieve fame in the metropolises of North

America and Europe as a public speaker, writer and filmmaker. As a writer, Grey Owl is implicated with Gutenberg technology. However, the Cree Daniel Beaver reveals to Jeremy that Grey Owl was different in real life than in his books, telling him that “He was a good fighter [...] He killed a man himself one time, in a fight,” and that he “liked to drink” and “liked women,” and “when he got to town, sometimes he went wild” (100-1). In doing so, Daniel Beaver highlights Belaney’s “wildness,” or his primitive, instinctive, “integral” side. By having an indigenous oral source flesh out the limited version of Grey Owl’s life presented in his books, Kroetsch manoeuvres Belaney out of the Gutenberg realm, allowing him to become an appropriately antimodern figurehead for Jeremy once more.

Prior to his arrival in Edmonton, Jeremy has already assumed the stereotypical clothing and hairstyle of an Indian that had been adopted by Grey Owl before him: “beaded moosehide moccasins,” “braids” and a “fringed buckskin jacket” (11). When he is given a lift to Notikeewin by a “cowboy” who earns his living on the rodeo circuit, Jeremy is mistaken for an Indian – an impression that he does nothing to put right (15). Later, however, when Jeremy meets Daniel Beaver and his family, he finds that his stereotypically “Indian” appearance contrasts with that of Daniel, who has a “brush cut” (65). One of the Beavers’ children is puzzled by Jeremy’s braids, asking his mother, “Why is his hair that way?” (65), emphasizing the inauthenticity of Jeremy’s costume. Later, having rescued Jeremy from a brawl, the Beavers clothe him in Daniel’s cast-offs, “a leather jacket with fringes” and “floral patterns worked in bright glass beads” (97), and a pair of “very old” moccasins, “decorated not with beads but with the dyed quills of porcupines” (98). Kroetsch’s respectful descriptions of these items of clothing reinforces the sense that they are pieces of “folk art,” the products of “instinctive ‘primitives’” rather than “‘knowing ‘moderns’” (Carney 113),

which in turn reinforces the antimodern essentialist assumptions connecting indigenes with artistic authenticity. Although these garments are coded as authentic in comparison with the Native-style garments that Jeremy had worn previously, it is significant that they are not dissimilar in appearance, consisting of leather and ornamentation. Despite the Cree father's modern haircut and method of transportation – a pick-up truck – Kroetsch nostalgically associates Natives with the “folk art” of their traditional clothing. Therefore, although he goes some way in *Gone Indian* towards locating Native people in the contemporary world, ultimately Kroetsch's antimodernism reinforces their association with the past.

The clothing of Jeremy in “authentic” Native garments by the Beavers takes an almost ritualistic form (97). This ritualistic element emphasizes what Goldie has described as the trope of “mysticism” in settler accounts of contact with indigenous peoples. As Goldie suggests, mysticism evokes a state of “altered consciousness” in which the settler can perceive “the inside of Other,” and thereby acquires “a means of indigenization” (*Fear and Temptation* 138). Kroetsch's descriptions of Jeremy's experiences with the Beavers place *Gone Indian* within Goldie's pattern. However, there is an additional element in Kroetsch's use of Native mysticism in his novel, as he also uses this to reinforce the critique of modernity that recurs throughout his works of fiction. Having been clothed as an Indian, Jeremy becomes privy to a mystical experience of indigenization, as he has a visionary dream in which “the buffalo came back [...] from that one place where they had not all been shot and flayed,” moving south, and inspiring the Indians to likewise reclaim their territory:

The Chipewyan sent word to the Cree [...] The Cree sent word to the wondering Blackfoot [...] The Blackfoot advised their Sarcee allies: trim the hoofs of your waiting horses. Set feathers to the arrow. Cut wood for the bow

[...] Tell the Bloods. The cattle are gone from the prairie ranches; the ranches are gone. Tell the Piegans. The wolves are come from the north, are waiting to eat. The grizzly comes down from the western mountains. Tell the Stonies to build the buffalo pound. (102-103)

In Jeremy's dream, the return of the buffalo allows the First Nations to regain their strength. The tribes unite for "the scalping of Edmonton," an apocalyptic orgy of destruction in which the vestiges of modernity are wiped from the earth: "Department stores gave up their treasures to crackling flame: banks bubbled and burst like cauldrons of molten money. Churches fell in on their weeping worshippers. High rise apartments and their occupants, fused at last into a community of soul, smoked like wildcat gushers into the darkening sky" (104).

The apocalyptic dream of the end of Edmonton is a postcolonial vision in that it is an expression of white settler guilt about the displacement of indigenous peoples, but it is also a reaction against modernity: the disorder of the orgy of violence is seen as a necessary act that restores the original order, putting Natives and nature back in their rightful place, cleansing the colony of the settlers and the negative impact of their presence.¹² The metropolis of Edmonton is razed to the ground in Jeremy's vision: the trappings of the modern city are necessarily removed in a return to an idyllic golden age when buffalo roam once again: "They grazed on the rich green lawns of the old homes overlooking the river, shit all over the flower beds. They rubbed against the lamp posts and the parking meters, scratched and grunted and lay down in the shade of bloodied automobiles" (105). Jeremy's vision is a violent re-enactment of the sequence in *The Studhorse Man* where Hazard sets thousands of

¹² Furthermore, Jeremy's fantasy of violence may be an attempt to revise Alberta's present in favour of the return of its Native past, but it is dependent upon images of "Indian" savagery: torture, rape, and scalping (105). Goldie has explored the "commodity" of violence in white settler representations of the indigene: "Violence is yet one more of the standard commodities through which the indigene as imaginative textual creation is valorized" (*Fear and Temptation* 86).

horses loose in central Edmonton. Both incidents clearly demonstrate Kroetsch's criticism of the modern urban environment and its dissociation from the natural world.

Goldie draws attention to the association of indigenous peoples with prehistory in the writing of settler Canadians: the aboriginal peoples of the colony are perceived as "an historical artifact, a remnant of a golden age that seems to have little connection to anything akin to contemporary life" (17). In *Gone Indian* Kroetsch commends the indigenous relationship with the land and nature, and highlights the negative impact of the modernity of Euro-Canadian settlers on the environment through the construction of metropolises such as Edmonton. However, in doing so he divorces indigenous people from modernity, cementing the impression that they are anachronistic. The connection between Natives and the prehistoric is made explicit in another segment of Jeremy's vision of the destruction of Edmonton: "He was reaching towards a solitary animal: a painting of a buffalo, high on a wall of stone. He could only compare it to The Bellowing Bison, that lost and discovered drawing in the holy Cave of Altamira, Spain" (106).¹³ Altamira is the site of a significant series of prehistoric cave drawings of bison and other animals. Kroetsch's choice of this image makes a direct correlation between ancient cave people and twentieth-century Canadian Natives. Goldie has expressed concern over imagery that links Native peoples with prehistory, stressing that this can reinforce the idea that the Natives are a chronological anomaly for the white settler, "not part of now" (151). Kroetsch's "Scalping of Edmonton" promotes a backward-looking version of Native culture,

¹³ McLuhan writes of the appeal of the "close interrelation between the world and art of the cave man" to people who are disillusioned with modernity: "it was a great thrill for many late Romantics to break through suddenly into an 'understanding' of primitive art" as "men could not take much more of the fragmentation of work and experience by visual specialization" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 65).

privileging the prehistoric over the contemporary, thereby symbolically limiting the role of Natives and their possible contribution to contemporary Canadian life.¹⁴

Although Kroetsch is sympathetic towards Natives in *Gone Indian*, it is because they represent an alternative to modernity, not because they offer an alternative *within* modernity. Kroetsch offers no suggestion that Natives could participate in contemporary Canadian culture. In *Gone Indian*, Native peoples are no more than a symbol of a pre-modern existence, a golden age of harmony between humanity and nature that has been destroyed by the impact of urban modernity. Kroetsch suggests that “going Indian” is an antimodern act on the part of the settler, as it involves a conscious decision to reject the modern world. This idea annihilates any sense of the contemporary existence of indigenous peoples.

In his 1975 novel *Badlands*, Kroetsch continues to demonstrate his obsession with the destructive power of the technologies of modernity. Within the text, he places a high value on orality, which he suggests offers a positive alternative to the written word privileged by the modern, “Gutenberg” era. The message of *Badlands* is that oral sources, particularly indigenous ones, can counteract the fragmentation associated with written discourse. Kroetsch’s division of the narrative of *Badlands* into two levels enables his exploration of the contrast between the written and spoken word. One level of the text is a third-person narrative describing the 1916 boat expedition to search for dinosaur skeletons in the inhospitable valley of Alberta’s Red Deer River, led by the palaeontologist William Dawe, who writes a series of field notes in the process. The other level is a first-person narrative recounting the journey of Anna Dawe, William’s daughter, who in 1972 travels to Alberta to retrace her

¹⁴ This impression is compounded by *Badlands*, in which the Native woman Anna Yellowbird is associated with the prehistoric. Furthermore, in her inability to understand the First World War, Anna appears cut off from the global realities of her time, and is associated with primitivism as opposed to modernity.

father's route. Anna Dawe's narrative begins and ends the novel, with sections interspersed between chapters of the 1916 narrative at points in which key events have taken place. The 1916 narrative reveals the circumstances in which William Dawe's field notes were written, and lays bare the lies and emendations made by their author. The 1972 narrative offers Anna Dawe's exposé of the falsity of her father's written record, which she uncovers through conversation with Anna Yellowbird, a Native woman who accompanied the expedition fifty-six years previously.

Kroetsch clearly establishes that William Dawe, the leader of the fossil-hunting expedition, is a "Gutenberg Man." He is obsessed with recording all the details of the expedition in his field books; however, his control over the written account enables him to construct a one-sided version of events. At the climax of the novel, the youngest member of the expedition, a boy known as Tune, is killed in an explosion intended to disinter a dinosaur skeleton. Dawe keeps the location of Tune's body hidden from his crew, knowing that otherwise they would turn their attention from excavating fossils to retrieving the body of their companion. Dawe writes about the events in his field book, "trying to cite or fashion or penetrate or plumb or receive or accomplish or postulate or pretend the absolute truth that would give him his necessary lie" (239). The version that Dawe initially writes puts himself in a bad light, so he tears out the page, "crushing it, hurling it out at the water" (240). He rewrites the facts, absolving himself of blame and putting it on the victim instead: "*It was an unfortunate accident. Dawe crossing out the word, unfortunate. Starting again. No doubt the boy was. Careless. Didn't follow. He, Dawe, smashing the period down onto the page as if he would pierce it, penetrate, nail the book to the box*" (241). The violent manner in which Dawe writes indicates his desire for this to be the final word on the tragic events; the way in which he is said to "nail the book to the box" signals

his desire to fix the words so that no other interpretation is possible, concealing his own guilt and shame concerning Tune's death. Through embedding Dawe's field notes in the 1916 narrative, and also through critiquing them in the 1972 narrative, Kroetsch asserts the importance of interrogating sources from the past. He indicates that the seemingly whole, orderly narrative of Dawe's field notes provides what is in fact merely an illusion of completeness. Significantly, it is through oral conversation that Anna Dawe uncovers her father's action of concealing Tune's body (232-3). Taken as a whole, the overall narrative of *Badlands* indicates Kroetsch's desire to achieve a sense of organic unity by using "oral" sources to fill in the gaps in written documents.

In *Badlands*, Kroetsch reveals an ambivalent attitude towards writing. As a spontaneous expression of emotion and sensation, writing can offer the possibility of achieving self-awareness, and the potential organic "wholeness" that comes from self-knowledge, but this aspect of writing can be overruled by the cataloguing of events and scientific descriptions that aim to eclipse the personal subjectivity of the writer. By the end of the text, Dawe has utterly rejected the possibility that writing can be anything other than scientific documentation. His daughter Anna Dawe comments that "His field notes, after that summer, were less and less concerned with his crew, his dangers, his days of futile prospecting, his moments of discovery, his weariness, his frustrations. They became scientific descriptions of the size and location of bones, of the composition of the matrix, of the methods of extraction and preservation" (139). Anna reveals that her father continued to make such notes for many years after his last field trips: "when he might have been remembering, or regretting, or explaining, or planning, or dreaming, or hating, or even loving I suppose, he was busy putting down each day's tedium and trivia. Shutting out instead of letting in.

Concealing” (269). Kroetsch suggests that Dawe eventually becomes machine-like in the writing of his field notes. Injured and unable to work in the field himself, Dawe continues to write field notes based on the words of his deputy Web, “who knew, felt, that Dawe was not listening, as if the words he spoke passed directly from his mouth to a page in Dawe’s field book without ever touching Dawe’s mind” (193). The technology of writing contributes to Dawe’s sensory disintegration, as he loses a sense of organic wholeness by keeping his emotions and sensations separate from his recording of events.

Often, in Kroetsch’s novels, the “Gutenberg Men” who are his typical protagonists achieve a feeling of sensory unity through sex, as Jeremy Sadness’s experience with Bea Sunderman indicates. In *Badlands*, Kroetsch suggests that William Dawe is so much in thrall to the ordering, fragmenting impulse connected with modernization that he learns to control his sexual feelings. He meticulously arranges to spend just one evening a year with his wife. Rather than giving him the sensory wholeness that Kroetsch associates with fulfilling sex, “the sexual act as [Dawe] provoked it, in his diabolical and maliciously meditated and organized and executed fashion, was intended to foreclose on randomness itself” (109). Through his loaded terminology, the author reveals his distaste for the “unnatural” repression exhibited by Dawe, whose skills of segmentation and organization deny him the sensory unity that Kroetsch’s protagonists often achieve through sex.

Kroetsch provides an important contrast with Dawe in the farmer Claude McBride, who is one of the expedition’s crew. The opposite of a compartmentalized “Gutenberg Man,” McBride uses all of his senses in piloting Dawe’s raft: he can “find the current, the channel in a river, as if he sniffs it out, smells it – no, not that, hears it, by God” (38) (there are clear parallels with Peter Guy in *But We Are Exiles*). At one

point, McBride is swept from the flatboat and presumed drowned, but then is rediscovered covered in mud and stinking of skunk-spray. Following this incident, McBride sleeps in the mud, “hardly knowing his own body from the soft and comforting earth” (46). When he mends the boat, he is physically immersed in the earth itself, indicating his strong connection with the natural environment as he works in “the cooling and stinking mud around and under the boat, limping, kneeling in silt and muddied water, his torso and arms and face burning in the sun” (48). McBride’s manual labour, and his sensation of oneness with the earth, marks him as Kroetsch’s ideal of an integral man. As McBride is a farmer, Kroetsch’s idealization of this character reiterates his respect for the rural-pastoral environment as detailed in *When Sick for Home*. McBride abandons the Dawe expedition following a dream about “his quarter-section of rich black dirt, his greening wheat, his stabled horses, his Saturday drive to town, his Sunday rest, his garden behind his house, his peas in blossom in the morning sun, his potatoes swelling in the dark earth” (51). The text exposes the division between McBride, who has a connection with the earth, and Dawe, who is “different from and indifferent to all the real and natural world” (56). By highlighting these contrasting attitudes, Kroetsch signals what he sees as the difference between integral men and Gutenberg men. That Kroetsch is more sympathetic to the point of view represented by McBride rather than Dawe becomes clear when McBride’s replacement Tune is seduced into the realm of technology and modernity, and dies as result.

Following the pattern established in his previous novels, Kroetsch associates modern technology with destruction in *Badlands*. In a mine near Drumheller, Dawe is given explosives by a miner who believes that these will help in his excavations. Ominously, the miner Grimlich reveals that he has caused a death while dynamiting a

fishing hole (82). Subsequently, these explosives cause the death of Tune in the climactic section of the novel. Other omens of the deadly impact of the technologies of modernity occur in the novel: Dawe recalls that many of the finest discoveries of the palaeontologist Charles Sternberg were lost en route to England when the ship carrying them was torpedoed (118), and a photographer who briefly joins the expedition tells Dawe and his men that experiments with flash photography “damned near blew [my] head off” (130). The havoc wreaked by the technologies of modernity in World War I is paralleled with the events of the Dawe Expedition of 1916, as Europe is said to be “filling its earth with the bones of its own young” (139), and the Native woman Anna Yellowbird is revealed to have lost her husband in the war (148). While excavating dinosaur skeletons meticulously by hand, the men are eventually seduced by the speed of modern technology, and by the temptation to have, “after eighteen days of back-breaking labour, the remaining task completed in a matter of seconds” (214). Instead of bringing instantaneous success, the plan to blast free the remaining dinosaur skeleton results in the death of Tune, who is buried alive when a mountain of shale collapses on him, highlighting the parallels made by Kroetsch between the European war and Dawe’s venture. Furthermore, the destructive impact of this modern technology on the natural world is highlighted in the description of Anna Yellowbird’s perception of the absence of natural creatures following the explosion: “No birds moved in the autumn sky: the crows, the blackbirds, that should be gathering. The geese that should be moving overhead” (217). As Anna Yellowbird walks towards the site of Tune’s accident, pastoral description gives way to an image of violent wounding: “sagebrush now, through cacti; through the last yellow flowers of the summer – gumweed, broomweed, sunflowers, golden asters... And up through the long coulee she could see more clearly now the gash of fresh clay” (216). In his

description of the death of Tune, Kroetsch forcefully associates new technologies with death and environmental destruction.

By ascribing to Anna Yellowbird a strong affiliation with nature, Kroetsch connects her with an idealized pre-modern realm where respect is still accorded to the natural world. As in *Gone Indian*, Kroetsch continues to privilege Native peoples, seeing them as offering an alternative existence to modern life, but in doing so he cements an association between indigenous peoples and prehistory. Anna's primitivism is foregrounded when Dawe discovers that she is living in a tipi made of fossils, "the fragments of ribs and vertebrae, of the shells of turtles, of skulls, of long bones" (144). As Terry Goldie suggests, this passage specifically aligns the Native woman with the prehistoric, thereby shaping "the indigene into a historical artefact, a remnant of a golden age that seems to have little connection to contemporary life ("Semiotic" 200). While Sherrill E. Grace argues that Anna Yellowbird "represents a living past that contradicts the whiteman's idea of an empty west" ("Wastelands" 33), it is interesting to note the phrase "living past" rather than "living present" in Grace's formulation. Kroetsch values the past more than the present, and therefore his construction of Anna Yellowbird as an anachronism is rooted in his denigration of modernity. For example, he depicts Anna Yellowbird as being more resilient than the technology-dependent men of the Dawe Expedition, beating them to their destination in the Badlands by walking, while they make use of a boat. Native people, as exemplified by Anna Yellowbird in *Badlands*, perform a function in Kroetsch's texts: they allow white Canadian settlers to glimpse an alternative to the obsession with technological modernization that characterizes twentieth-century life for Kroetsch. Despite his sympathetic portrayal of such characters as Anna Yellowbird in this novel, the Beaver family in *Gone Indian*, and the Inuit Lawrence Firth in *But We Are*

Exiles, Kroetsch offers a one-dimensional response to the presence of indigenous peoples in contemporary Canadian life. These characters exist *for* the white protagonists, enabling them to see a way of life that eclipses the fragmentation of the modern world, and epitomizes the antimodern ideal.

Native characters such as Anna Yellowbird perform an important function in Kroetsch's antimodern project, enabling European Canadian characters to re-evaluate orality. In *Badlands*, Kroetsch offers Native orality as an alternative to the modern culture in which the written word is privileged. By learning to appreciate oral discourse, Anna Dawe achieves sensory integration, countering the fragmentation of her existence in the modern world. The indigene Anna Yellowbird provides Anna Dawe with a gateway into an oral culture that transforms her existence. At the outset of the novel, Anna Dawe is a Gutenberg woman who isolates herself, buying and reading "books by the parcel," and choosing the printed word over the real world (3). By establishing contact with Anna Yellowbird, Anna Dawe rediscovers the pleasure of the interplay of the audile-tactile senses. The pair are described by Anna Dawe as "laughing so hard I had to stop the car, and while we were stopped we got out to relieve ourselves, and we squatted there on the prairie – 'Watch out for thistles,' Anna said – and we were peeing and laughing, the tears running down our cheeks" (262). She recalls "the smell of cowshit rich and delicious on the air" (259); as Kroetsch's previous text *When Sick for Home* suggests, a Rabelaisian acceptance and celebration of bodily functions signals that a character is attuned to the audile-tactile senses that he values so highly. After sleeping in her car Anna Dawe pronounces that she feels "cramped and dirty and smelly and good" (265). Through her conversation and laughter with Anna Yellowbird, Anna Dawe discovers an oral corrective to the limited account offered by her father's field books.

The abandonment of technology is at the heart of Anna Dawe's sensory recuperation. At the end of the novel, Anna Dawe and Anna Yellowbird desert their motorcar, and instead complete their journey to the source of the Red Deer River by foot. Kroetsch's description of the effects of this walk on Anna Yellowbird emphasizes the tactile sensation of walking, and also aligns Anna Dawe with Anna Yellowbird: "my feet were blistered and raw, every bone of my body aching: and that other Anna, remembering her longer walk, the creeks she crossed, the cliffs, the maze of buttes, the blazing sun" (266). As in his account of Jeremy Sadness's participation in a snowshoe race, in this description of the two Annas' walk, Kroetsch reiterates the antimodern trope of the need to test the body in a rural or wilderness environment. When they reach the lake that feeds the Red Deer River the women destroy the remains of the Dawe Expedition preserved through the written word and the photographic image, William Dawe's field books and Michael Sinnott's photographs of the raft and its crew. In the destruction of these items, Anna Dawe alters her sensory balance, re-privileging the audile-tactile senses associated with pre-modern times over the visual sense connected with modernity. The final pages of the novel indicate that both Annas are party to a sensory integration of sight, touch, voice and hearing as they walk away from the lake by starlight: "we looked at those billions of years of light," "We sang together, that awful song about rolling over in the clover, because that was the only song we both remembered and could sing long enough to see us through. We walked out of there hand in hand, arm in arm, holding each other" (270). The indigene Anna Yellowbird has provided Anna Dawe with a means of bypassing the Gutenberg era, acquiring a sensory wholeness that is strongly linked to Native orality. However, while Kroetsch's privileging of indigenous modes of experience is progressive on a surface level, it also associates the native with pre-

modernity and primitivism. Certainly, Kroetsch's antimodernism leads him to imbue these qualities with positive value, however, it is clear that from a contemporary Native perspective such patterns of valuation can reinforce the sense that indigenous peoples are anachronistic.

In *The Studhorse Man*, *Gone Indian* and *Badlands*, Kroetsch's antimodernism is most clearly reflected in the way that his narratives take Demeter Proudfoot, Jeremy Sadness and Anna Dawe out into rural or wilderness environments, allowing them to achieve the sensory wholeness denied to them during their time as visually-biased Gutenberg men and women. For each of these characters, to reject modernity is to achieve agency, combating the fragmenting effects of the modern era. While Berman has argued that artistic modernism represents the desire of people to become "the subjects as well as the objects of modernization" (16), Kroetsch denies that this can ever happen. Only a blanket rejection of the modern world and its technologies can result in the achievement of an unfragmented subjectivity according to these novels. Kroetsch excludes the possibility of the existence of an "alternative modernity" within the rural environment. Rod Bantjes argues that since the early twentieth century Canada's prairie farmers have been agents of modernization, often in direct opposition to the antimodern recommendations of government agricultural advisors who have urged them to maintain the pastoral tradition of mixed-use farming: "In their embrace of the wheat monoculture they [...] enlist[ed] as agents in the making of 'modernity,' not passively, but against the explicit opposition of expert advisors" ("Modernism" 137). Tellingly, although in *The Studhorse Man* the rural prairie characters of Marie Eshpeter, Tad Proudfoot and his sons clearly accept and profit from technological modernity, Kroetsch indicates that they are succumbing to the external influence of the modernity associated with the Second World War. Rather

than being subjects of modernization, Kroetsch implies that these characters are its objects. By simplifying the response of Canada's residents to modernity, Kroetsch maintains the impression that 'authentic' Canadians are resistant to external modernizing influences, achieving sensory harmony in their rural or wilderness idylls. Ultimately, his texts reinforce the antimodern cultural nationalism that associates authenticity of existence with physical exertion in the Canadian landscape, locating Kroetsch within a tradition exemplified by the Group of Seven in the early twentieth century.

Chapter 5: *What the Crow Said*

At the end of *What the Crow Said* (1978), the printer Gus Liebhaber makes love with the farmer Tiddy Lang. In bed together, they form an image of organic unity: “the naked circle of everything” (193).¹ This unmistakable reference to inclusive wholeness, positioned in the climactic pages, signals that the idea of unity is one of Kroetsch’s preoccupations in this novel. This is supported by his remarks in a 1981 interview with Alan Twigg, in which he says that *What the Crow Said* “is full of balances and halves which we have to put together. That’s what intrigues me now. I’m intrigued by the idea of bringing back together not only male and female, but also the self with that total relationship with the world” (111). These comments place a strong emphasis on the idea of a complete, organic harmony between human beings and the world around them (111).

In other discussions of *What the Crow Said*, however, Kroetsch has indicated that the idea of creating a sense of unity was far from his mind when writing the book. For example, in an interview with Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, published in 1982, he announces that in *What the Crow Said* he offers narrative multiplicity because “I didn’t want to elaborate it all into its own unity” (*Labyrinths of Voice* 118). He remarks, “I think that one of the dangers in our own time is [...] making everything into *one*, whether it is oil companies or whatever” (*Labyrinths of Voice* 118), linking his desire for “multiplicity” in literary narrative with an abhorrence of a totalizing kind of modernity. In an interview with Linda Kenyon he suggests that *What the Crow Said* takes the form of fragments: “if you want to read them one way, read them another way... it’s up to you” (16). In his comments to Kenyon, Kroetsch

¹ This phrase is repeated verbatim on the next page, giving it a heightened emphasis (194).

appears to privilege the concept of fragmentation, and devalue ideas of unity and wholeness. However, as I have discussed in relation to Kroetsch's response to modernism in my chapter on *When Sick for Home*, the seeming contradiction between fragmentation and unity is challenged by the realization that for Kroetsch, multiplicity is a version of wholeness. Markedly different from the totalizing unity which Kroetsch associates with modernity, "organic" unity is created by allowing the play of multiple elements and perspectives. This organic unity is similar to McLuhan's ideal of simultaneity, which he offers as a contrast to the singular, limited and fragmented perspectives that are mistaken for "wholeness" within Gutenberg culture. While Kroetsch claims to reject textual closure in his discussions of *What the Crow Said*, this work displays his continuing quest for the wholeness of a pre- or antimodern environment of sensory integration. In his published comments on *What the Crow Said*, Kroetsch therefore seems to demonstrate an ambivalent attitude, veering between a stated desire to privilege the concept of fragmentation (in Kenyon), and an impulse towards "bringing back together" (in Twigg). In actuality, both of these aspects are related to Kroetsch's desire to create a sense of organic wholeness within his text, as exemplified by the image of "the naked circle of everything" that comes at the end of *What the Crow Said*. The novel reveals Kroetsch's continued desire for complete sensory involvement, typically achieved in an idealized rural location. As a small country town, Kroetsch's setting of Big Indian is a liminal place, offering aspects of technological modernity as well as access to the pastoral environment. In *What the Crow Said*, Kroetsch privileges rural existence by having the townspeople of Big Indian ultimately reject the trappings of modern life that he associates with disunity and fragmentation.

What the Crow Said covers a period of about twenty-five years in the history of the small prairie town of Big Indian. Clearly modelled on Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the novel provides a "magic realist" account of this small town's day-to-day existence, in which for example a woman is impregnated by bees, a game of cards lasts 151 days with one of the players being a ghost, a boy is raised by coyotes, and the men of the town declare war on the sky.² In *Labyrinths of Voice* Kroetsch claims that *What the Crow Said* represents the oral culture of Alberta, assenting to Wilson's statement that "Alberta is pretechnological and oral in its culture" in the novel, and responding, "I take that as a given in that particular novel" (72). Even in 1978, the year of publication of *What the Crow Said*, Alberta was in an advanced state of modernization, reflected in its booming oil economy, and the expansion and development of the cities of Edmonton and Calgary. Why, then, does Kroetsch persist in contributing to the impression that Alberta culture is "pretechnological and oral"? Kroetsch's anti-technological bias can be compared fruitfully with the theories of Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan makes reference to a Chinese parable to illustrate the harm that technology can do to a sense of organic unity. The sage Tzu-Gung explains the concept of the draw-well to an old man who is irrigating his land by hand, but the old man dismisses Tzu-Gung's idea, suggesting that one who uses a machine becomes like a machine, leading to "uncertainty in the strivings of the soul" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 30). For McLuhan, this phrase "is perhaps one of the aptest descriptions of man's condition in our modern crisis" (30).³ In *The*

² See Geert Lernout's "Twenty-Five Years of Solitude", Stephen Slemon's "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," and Brian Edwards's "Novelist as Trickster: the Magical Presence of Gabriel García Márquez in Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*" for detailed comparisons of Marquez's and Kroetsch's texts.

³ McLuhan's valorization of Chinese functions in a similar manner as Kroetsch's response to indigenous Canadian cultures: both writers reveal an Orientalist attitude suggesting that Chinese and Native cultures are more "primitive," and therefore more authentic than Western civilization, a common antimodern paradigm. Within Kroetsch's novel *Badlands*, the Chinese cook known as Grizzly is associated with the natural world by his name. Grizzly is also aligned with the Native woman Anna

Gutenberg Galaxy, McLuhan makes damning pronouncements on the impact of mechanization, as exemplified by the printing press, on the sensory organic unity of humankind. He claims that “The stripping of the senses and the interruption of their interplay in tactile synesthesia may well have been one of the effects of the Gutenberg technology,” suggesting that “most civilized people are crude and numb in their perceptions, compared with the hyperesthesia of oral and auditory cultures” (17, 27). Kroetsch’s espousal of orality is based on similar ideas to those of McLuhan. In *The Crow Journals*, his own book about the writing of the novel, Kroetsch attributes the success of his writing methods to his privileging of oral culture, as he describes himself “swapping stories in a way that once again makes me realize where the method of *What the Crow Said* really comes from. I listen” (83).

Similarities between Kroetsch’s response to technology and that of McLuhan are also evident throughout *What the Crow Said*. In this novel, Alberta is not exactly *pretechnological*, as Wilson has described it, but Kroetsch continually represents the technologies that impact on the people of Big Indian as nothing but destructive. For example, several of Tiddy Lang’s sons-in-law are killed by forms of mechanized technology. Nick Droniuk falls into a threshing machine, Eli Wurtz is killed when his truck collides with a train (echoing of one of the possible fates of Jeremy Sadness in *Gone Indian*), and Mick O’Holleran falls from an oil derrick (124, 126, 127). Another potential son-in-law, Jerry Lapanne, is killed when his plane crashes into a railway bridge, which is itself symbolic of the technologies of architecture and engineering (181). When Lapanne’s body is discovered, it transpires that he ended up being hanged by telephone wires, having been flung from the plane in the crash (184). The excess of technological input into Lapanne’s death further emphasizes Kroetsch’s

Yellowbird with whom he builds the tipi made of dinosaur bones, a signifier of primitivism discussed in the previous chapter.

distaste for the machines of modernity: even the name of the character evokes the French phrase “la panne”, meaning a mechanical breakdown. Tiddy’s first husband Martin Lang dies frozen to his plow, (a “popping John Deere” [193]) which is representative of humanity’s use of technology to attempt to master nature (19). Her second husband John Skandl is killed when his plane crashes due to ice forming on its wings (119). As Skandl had previously run a business cutting and selling ice (40), and had used it to build a lighthouse, the ice that causes his plane-crash appears to be nature’s revenge upon one who attempts to control and commodify it. Skandl’s connection with modernization is signalled by his wish for Big Indian to be linked to the province’s road network (53), and his desire for “paved highways of the kind he’d heard were being built in other countries, on other continents” (55).

In the course of the novel, the adverse effect of technology on the bodies of the men of the town is evident. Several men have been maimed in some way by the impact of the machines of modernity. Among them are Mick O’Holleran, who is a “veteran who’d lost his right leg and his private parts in what he referred to as an English war” (57), and Andy Wolbeck, who has artificial ivory toes because “on a bet he let a train run over the tip of his right shoe” (86). Several other men in the novel have damaged sensory organs: Skandl’s employees Alphonse Martz and Bill Morgan are, respectively, deaf in one ear and missing an eye (25). Towards the end of the novel Kroetsch presents a catalogue of the injuries visited upon the men of the town during their out-and-out battle with nature, “The War Against the Sky”:

Liebhaber looked about him and realized that every male over the age of sixteen in the Municipality of Bigknife had been injured or maimed or had suffered a related illness, in The War Against the Sky. Gunshot wounds had crippled grown men, robbed youths of fingers and toes. Exploding shotgun

barrels had scarred handsome faces and ripped at biceps and elbows. Wise and confident men, driven to drink, had missed the curve in the road down into the valley, had sheared off powerline poles, had plunged over the banks of coulees, into boulders and gullies. One hundred and seventeen people had in six hours suffered horsefly bites. Hunters had turned over in boats, had been chewed up by the propellers of outboard motors [...] (160)

This list of injuries indicates Kroetsch's indictment of man's (and I use the gendered term specifically) attempts to master nature, and the destructive impact of technology.

What the Crow Said is a novel in which all technologies are loaded with negative symbolism. Even the sound of an airplane in the sky is "a promise of doom and violation" (168). It is also a text in which nature triumphs over the machines of modernity. At one point the army arrives to participate in *The War Against the Sky*, itself a symbol of the negative aspects of technological modernity, with its "column of tanks [which] clanked and crawled away from a row of neatly ordered olive-green tents", its artillery and "flight of F-104s" (170). The military effort is defeated by the natural phenomena of rain and hail:

All night the rain fell and in the morning the soldier's camp, in the valley, was half under water. The big trucks and the trailers were mired in mud. The slow men, moving in the mud and the water, were the color of spring, green and brown, as if they too had unwillingly, sprouted and grown in response to the insistent rain. Their tents looked like toadstools. (172-3).

The imagery of machines becoming stuck in mud, and of tents becoming mushroom-like, demonstrates the ability of nature to overwhelm the modern military. When a hailstorm arrives, "The artillery unit fell silent. Three men sprawled motionless in the mud; they were carried by comrades in steel helmets to the first aid section" (173).

Nature's revenge at the end of the novel includes the destruction of the town's railway bridge, once more signalling the triumph over technology (180). Kroetsch uses the image of "the center piling of the old bridge, stiff and tall like a lighthouse, in the middle of the swollen river" (180) to echo John Skandl's lighthouse of ice built in the middle of the frozen river (37-39): another example of a man's attempt to subordinate nature. The ice lighthouse has itself been destroyed by a natural phenomenon, a warm chinook wind which causes a sudden thaw (49). Although technology threatens the natural harmony and sensory integration of the town of Big Indian, Kroetsch's streak of romantic antimodernism ensures that it can be overcome by nature. By the end of the novel the roads desired by Skandl are left incomplete, the railway bridge has been destroyed, and the airplanes of Skandl and Lapanne have crashed. Unlike McLuhan, who offers the idea of electronic technology as a counter to the impact of mechanization, Kroetsch's alternative to the mechanization unleashed by modernity is to retreat into a pastoral idyll: a farmhouse bedroom where a man and woman make love, forming "the naked circle of everything" (193).

In *What the Crow Said*, two separate plane crashes kill John Skandl and Jerry Lapanne. In Kroetsch's published diary *The Crow Journals*, which describes the writing process of the novel, he writes about editing a special edition of the journal *boundary 2* on Canadian writing, expressing his desire to include within the issue "pictures of crashing airplanes" as a reaction "Against a humanism that coerces" (15). What is this "humanism that coerces"? I argue that Kroetsch associates "humanism" with a *modernity* that "coerces". He reacts against how his duties as an editor mean that he makes disparate journal articles "so goddamned *orderly*" (15). Kroetsch equates orderliness with "coercion," in other words, a sense of being in complete control over his materials. His craving to include elements of disorder – in fact, to

include images of the destruction of technology – indicates a desire to evoke the disorder of the natural world within the “orderly” pages of the journal.⁴

Drawing parallels with McLuhan, I argue that in this journal entry Kroetsch expresses his desire to defy the orderly, regimented aspects of print culture epitomized by the editorial process. This idea impacts on *What the Crow Said*, as Kroetsch makes his central character Gus Liebhaber a newspaper editor, and therefore a “Gutenberg man.”⁵ McLuhan himself is critical of the impact of what might be called “orderliness” on the sensory balance of humankind: for example, he links the development of a focus on itemization and precise measurement to the emergence of print technology during the Renaissance (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 166-8) and contrasts “oral, passionate wholeness of character” (172) associated with societies not wholly in thrall to technology with a sense that “people are reduced to things by the segmental itemizing methods of the new print culture” (174). Referring to J. Huizinga’s *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, McLuhan distinguishes a pre-Gutenberg world of “diversity, passionate group life, and community rituals” from a post-Gutenberg world of “uniformity, quiet privacy, and individualism” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 118). The “humanism that coerces,” in Kroetsch’s terms, strongly resembles the “segmental itemizing methods of the new print culture” in McLuhan’s terminology. However, McLuhan sees a solution to all this fragmentation in the development of electronic technologies which offer “total human interdependence” in contrast with the isolated, fragmented individualism of the Gutenberg age (*Gutenberg*

⁴ Photographs of plane crashes were indeed included in the Canadian issue of *boundary 2*. I have noted the response of William Spanos (who co-founded *boundary 2* with Kroetsch) to these images in the introduction, note 27.

⁵ Geert Lernout lists McLuhan as a possible influence on Kroetsch, but does not provide any support for this assertion. While Peter Thomas briefly notes that there are “unmistakably McLuhanesque overtones” in Kroetsch’s treatment of Liebhaber, he does not elaborate upon what these might be (107). Neither critic responds to the antimodernist impetus at the centre of both McLuhan’s and Kroetsch’s binary opposition of orality and literacy.

Galaxy 157). For McLuhan, it is the development of electronic technologies that allows humanity to get back in touch with pre-modern organic wholeness and sensory involvement, as he praises “our modern [i.e. late twentieth-century] bias towards synesthesia and audile-tactile richness of experience” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 147). In contrast, in *What the Crow Said*, as in his other novels, Kroetsch indicates that the only way to avoid the fragmentation of modern life is to abandon technology and to retreat to the idealized pastoral realm of the rural community which has never wholly lost touch with the “audile-tactile,” oral culture that has been eroded by urban modernity.

As is clear from the title of his book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan sees print as the technology which has been most disruptive to the sensory balance and synesthesia of the medieval, oral world: “It was not until the experience of mass production of exactly uniform and repeatable type, that the fission of the senses occurred, and the visual dimension broke away from the other senses” (54). In *What the Crow Said*, Kroetsch engages with print culture, making it a dominant theme in the novel. Like McLuhan, Kroetsch decries the negative impact of print technology, but unlike McLuhan, Kroetsch does not see the solution to this crisis emerging through electronic technologies, but through a rejection of print in favour of the oral modes that pre-existed it. Kroetsch’s “postmodernism” is quite obviously a form of anti-modernity: he reacts against both mechanical and electronic technologies, as to reject these is to embrace an ideal of unity between man, woman and nature, a harmonious wholeness represented by that key image, “the naked circle of everything” (193)

Kroetsch’s engagement with the idea of print in *What the Crow Said* is focussed on the character of Gus Liebhaber, the editor and printer of the small-town

newspaper, the *Big Indian Signal*. While he uses the printing press to make a living, Liebhaber has serious misgivings about its impact, in particular the way in which printing obliterates the need for memory. Liebhaber laments that “it was Gutenberg who’d made all memory of the past irrelevant” (59), a sentiment that is repeated later in the novel with the additional remark that “only the future, and that just barely, was free of Gutenberg’s vast design” (102). Similarly, McLuhan has expressed concern about the impact of writing upon memory. He cites an example from Plato, wherein Thamus tells Theuth, the “father of letters”, that “this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves” (qtd. in *Gutenberg Galaxy* 25). This concern is manifested in Kroetsch’s novel by Liebhaber, who can’t remember anything about his life: “he could not remember something as simple as how he got to Big Indian, or how he learned the printer’s trade, or where he came from” (12). In stark contrast is Tiddy Lang, who remembers “everything,” despite the fact that “all her life she’d meant to write something down. She’d meant to make notes, but hadn’t” (192). Kroetsch suggests that it is *because* Tiddy has not made notes, and has not succumbed to the written word, that her memory is intact. Furthermore, as Tiddy “could hardly tell her memory from the moment” (192), she exemplifies the “simultaneity” or “wholeness of experience and meaning” valorized by McLuhan as a quality that enables the return to a state of “aboriginal wholeness” predating the print age (Krupnick 111).

In writing *What the Crow Said* Kroetsch was inspired by South American magic realism. There are “magical” aspects associated with memory within the novel, as Liebhaber can only remember events from the future. He “remembers” that Tiddy’s husband Martin Lang is to die on a particular night (9), that her second husband John

Skandl is returning from the city by airplane (102), and that there will be a flood in Big Indian (128). One of the key themes of *What the Crow Said* is the fixity of the printed word. Knowing from his “memory” of the future that Martin Lang is about to die, Liebhaber attempts to stop this event from occurring by not finishing the obituary of Lang that he is writing for the *Big Indian Signal*: “He couldn’t finish the story; he couldn’t complete the page and add the quoins, check the footstick, the sidestick, lock up the form...” (10). Liebhaber, by not fixing the language comprised by his blocks of type on the page, is trying to prevent the fixity of death for Martin Lang. His pressman Zike interferes, completing the page and printing the newspaper, sealing Martin Lang’s fate (14).

Kroetsch demonstrates ambivalent responses to writing and printing in *What the Crow Said*, exemplified by Liebhaber’s love/hate relationship with print. This ambivalence is connected with print’s ability to enable ordering and fixation. At times Liebhaber rails against the fixity of the written word, at others he sees the benefit of print as a means of preservation. *The Crow Journals* reveal an insight achieved by Kroetsch, which has an important impact on the novel. On March 9 1974, Kroetsch makes a note about his Aunt Annie who told him tales of family history: “She was unable to read or write and had instead a memory that covered many decades. I was not wise enough to listen carefully or to write down what she had to say, and now it’s lost...” (16). This passage clearly emphasizes Kroetsch’s awareness of the impermanence of the oral, and his desire to have fixed down his aunt’s words in a permanent written record, showing insight into the way these ideas were developed in *What the Crow Said*. At certain times, Liebhaber sees print’s fixity as one of its most valuable qualities. He suggests that it offers immortality as lives can be memorialized in text, and expresses his pity for Gutenberg who did not “preserve” memory of his

own life by putting it into print: “He began to feel a condescending pity for poor Gutenberg, crazy as a bat in a curious way, obsessed to the point of self-destruction; old Gutenberg, dying childless, penniless, friendless, anonymous, almost not invented into his own story” (63). Gutenberg’s failure, in Liebhaber’s eyes, was that he did not immortalize his own life: “Liebhaber hit on the notion that he might avoid Gutenberg’s fate by making a few autobiographical notes. *I am become my own legend*, he typed on the big [Linotype] machine; he was secure, there in the night, the matrices falling into place at his command. *I perish. But only in a dream...*” (64).

Liebhaber’s obsession with the letters of the alphabet relates to a similar concern in McLuhan’s work. He suggests that, in phonetic alphabet, “semantically meaningless letters are used to correspond to semantically meaningless sounds” and argues that “The phonetically written word sacrifices worlds of meaning and perception that were secured by forms like the hieroglyph and the Chinese ideogram” (*Understanding Media* 83). In his valorization of the Chinese ideogram, McLuhan once again reveals his Orientalist antimodernism: he mythologizes Chinese culture by insisting that Chinese letters are indicative of a more “tribal,” instinctual culture that is closer to nature than that of the modernized West. Praising pictographic and ideographic forms of writing, McLuhan suggests that “the divorce between the visual and the other senses remains incomplete [...] in all forms of writing save the phonetic alphabet” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 47). In forms of “pictorial” writing, McLuhan therefore sees the possibility of interaction between the senses of sight and sound that he feels has been eroded by use of the phonetic alphabet. Significantly, in the process of Liebhaber’s sensory development in *What the Crow Said*, he contemplates the letter O, trying to see it as an example of picture-writing rather than a phonetic letter.

He thought of the letter O, from his collection of wood type. He tried to let it become a mere circle. A cat's eye. The perfect circle of a soap bubble. He would free the O from the O, let back into the world the zero of ought. A spinning coin. The inside of a robin's nest. The white and lifted host in the priest's right hand. The absolute of Tiddy's breast. (64)

In contemplating the pictorial resonances of the letter O, Liebhaber attempts to achieve the "rich store of inclusive perception" that McLuhan associates with non-phonetic writing (*Understanding Media* 84). I argue that one of Kroetsch's aims in writing *What the Crow Said* is to create an atmosphere of sensory integration that counteracts what McLuhan sees as the purely abstract visuality of phonetic script, especially when it is mechanically reproduced in the form of print. Echoing McLuhan, Kroetsch desires to recapture a sense of wholeness believed to have been lost to (Western) humanity since the advent of the technologies of phonetic writing and the printing press.

Like McLuhan, Kroetsch suggests that sensory wholeness can be achieved if people rediscover the audile-tactile senses that have been subsumed by modernity's visual bias. Over time, Liebhaber becomes reconciled with his status as a printer when he achieves a "tactile" relationship with his printing press. Awareness of the physical act of moving type moves him towards his ultimate achievement of a sense of organic wholeness. No longer bound exclusively to the visual sense, Liebhaber's newfound focus on the tactility of the physical type means that he is able to begin to achieve sensory integration: "his hands wanted those few scraps of wood, those fragments of old trees, carved and cut into the shapes of the alphabet" (177). Kroetsch's use of natural imagery, focusing on the wood with which the blocks of type were made, naturalizes the printing press, changing it from a cold and mechanical form of

technology into something derived from the earth and the landscape itself. The wood from which the type is made is identified as “rock maple,” a name that evokes two of the predominant elements in the natural landscape of Canada (46).

Kroetsch’s development of the character of Liebhaber epitomizes his idealization of what McLuhan has called “the integral, the interplay of sense,” and his reaction against “a world that was seeking madness by the simple road of isolation of the senses” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 182). Liebhaber’s eventual reconciliation with the idea of print occurs when he realizes that the visual aspect of print can interact with other senses, creating the “interplay of sense” valued by McLuhan. A key example occurs when Liebhaber thinks about some of the words that he could form with his wooden type, “Hell. Help. Helm” (177). Each of these words is formed simply by altering the final letter of the others, a process that draws attention to the physical act of setting type. This emphasizes that Liebhaber is changing, as he is becoming aware of the tactile qualities of the type. By discovering his physical relationship with words, Liebhaber is allowed entrance into the audile-tactile realm. At the end of the novel, Liebhaber repeats these words when he is in bed with Tiddy, saying “Helm,” “Help,” “Hell,” but adds “Ho,” an expression of surprise (192). By *saying* these words, Liebhaber is liberated from the visual realm of the printed word – an unshackling already signalled by his discovery of the “tactile” qualities of language – and is finally able to become part of “the naked circle of everything” (193).

By drawing attention to the importance of “oral speech” in his novel, and by privileging the oral, “tall tale” culture of Alberta in this text as well as in other works of fiction such as *When Sick for Home*, *The Words of My Roaring* and *The Man from the Creeks*, Kroetsch exhibits phonocentric tendencies similar to those of McLuhan. Their valorization of speech over writing contrasts with Jacques Derrida’s position.

Like Kroetsch, McLuhan aims to re-privilege the spoken over the written word, as a corrective to the sensory imbalance induced by print: “The phonetic alphabet reduced the use of all the senses at once, which is oral speech, to a merely visual code” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 45). For both Kroetsch and McLuhan, oral speech is closer to nature than the written word. They share this phonocentrism with Saussure and Rousseau, whom Derrida critiques in *Of Grammatology*: “Saussure is faithful to the tradition that has always associated writing with the fatal violence of the political institution. It is clearly a matter, as with Rousseau for example, of a break with nature, of a usurpation that was coupled with theoretical blindness to the natural essence of language, at any rate to the natural bond between the ‘instituted signs’ of the voice and ‘the first language of man’, the ‘cry of nature’” (36). The gulf between Derrida’s thinking on orality and that of Kroetsch is signalled by the importance attached to various shouts and cries in *What the Crow Said*, including that made by Vera Lang as she is penetrated by the bees (a “fierce and passionate and desperate ululation” [6]), that made by the men when they encounter Martin Lang’s ghost (“an animal roar,” a “bull sound, ferocious, out of the dark earth itself, the sound of the darkness itself” [98]), and that issued by Joe Lightning as he falls to his death (“a scream of release,” “a laugh of [...] absolute obscenity” [142]). These cries represent the unrepressed, voice of nature, placing Kroetsch’s attitude to orality alongside that ascribed to Rousseau and Saussure by Derrida.

Kroetsch clearly prioritises the spoken word in his novels. Sharing McLuhan’s antimodernism, Kroetsch sees the “audile-tactile” realm of pre-modernity in a much more positive light than the mechanical world of the post-Gutenberg era. However, Kroetsch is a writer. How can he reconcile his desire to valorize the oral with his chosen medium of print? There are two solutions in evidence in *What the Crow Said*.

Firstly, Kroetsch emphasizes that print can be a way of preserving the insights that can come from the fertile, “audile-tactile” minds of integral beings, such as the talking crow. Secondly, Kroetsch draws attention to acts of writing – and even printing – emphasizing that these can be tactile experiences in which the senses interact, and are not partitioned off in a manner that gives priority to vision.

One being entirely associated with the oral is the talking crow of the novel’s title. The pet of Tiddy Lang’s mentally disabled son J.G, the crow is a voice of opposition to the artificial “order” valued by the men of the town. This is symbolized in an interminable game of the card game *shmier*, which ends up lasting 151 days, reducing its participants to filthy, starving wretches.⁶ During the card game, the crow directs insults at the men who are participating in the game, like “*Dumbkopf*” (56), “Dummy” (68), and “Asshole” (69), and instructs them to “Bugger off” (75). Having forsaken their “natural” speech for formulaic conversation about the card game, the men are unable to counter the crow’s accusations intelligently, responding instead with an imitation bird call “Caw caw caw caw caw [...]” (76): “‘A bunch of raving idiots,’ the black crow said. It flapped away in disgust” (77). In contrast with the men, Tiddy Lang accepts the crow and communicates with it: “She learned to talk to J.G.’s pet crow, learned to give answers and take them too” (59). Upon the death of J.G., the crow leaves Big Indian, but after it has flown away, at the time of the War Against the Sky, when the consequences of the townsmen’s attempts to devalue and overcome nature come to the foreground, they wish they could remember its words:

Men asked each other, what did the crow say about the flight of birds in a high wind? What did it say about salamanders? They wished the crow hadn’t left

⁶ Kathleen Wall points out that the card game is a form of “culture” which is opposed to nature, and which is insular and inflexible (97), and suggests that “the unappetizing conditions of the *shmier* game aptly illustrate the lengths to which Liebhaber and his crew will go in order to confine themselves to a microcosm that has definable rules” (96).

them; they wanted to ask all the questions they'd neglected to ask while the crow was in their midst. And even while the crow had been talking, meditative and wise, they'd neglected to listen. (135).

In this segment, Kroetsch highlights the impermanence of oral speech. The crow is cited as an oral authority, but its sayings are being reconstructed as no one had actually bothered to listen, or to write its words down. Despite the absence of its actual words, the vaguely remembered pronouncements of the crow become a source of authority for the people of the town: "Now and then someone claimed to quote the black crow on the subject of women or of guns" (135). Here, Kroetsch suggests that spoken words which go unrecorded can be strategically misremembered by those who wish to use their authority to support a particular agenda.

Kroetsch also strives to counter what McLuhan sees as the visual bias of the written word by focusing on the tactile aspects of the act of writing, as experienced by the characters Rita Lang, and her sister Vera. Rita Lang's method of writing demonstrates considerable tactility. She corresponds with male prisoners: "She wrote erotic letters to those imprisoned men, spoke of her longing, of her dream of their thin, suffering bodies, of their pale hands. She caressed their thighs with words, she kissed the hairs on their bellies." (76). Her writing is an erotic act, evident in the equation she makes between her body and her writing materials: "She imagined them all, her faithful men, ripping open the scented envelopes that she so carefully slipped in the mail: Rita, bent at the table, slowly unbuttoning her blouse, furtive and wanton, lifting a nipple to her mouth. The quick flash of her tongue against the rising nipple, the motion of her pen" (191). Rita's writing dephallicizes the concept of the pen as penis, as her nipple is linked to her nib. As Luca Biagiotti suggests, Rita's "attitude to

writing entails total identification of word with deed” (112). For Rita, writing letters involves complete sensory involvement, and is a sexual act.

Rita’s sister Vera Lang is another writer. She contributes district news, or, as Liebhaver sees it, “gossip” (7), to the local newspaper. However, unlike the other contributors who concern themselves solely with parties, dances and weddings, Vera includes details about the natural world, indicating her harmonious sensory relationship with it: “Vera Lang, writing the district news for the *Big Indian Signal*, reported that the rabbits weren’t quite losing their white coats. The horses weren’t shedding” (7). Although Vera is a writer, she remains connected with the natural world, to such an extent that that she is made pregnant by a swarm of bees in the opening scene of the novel. Her affinity with nature is highlighted when the town is invaded by salamanders. While other townspeople panic, Vera writes “an eloquent defense of the helpless little creatures,” in which she praises “their soft, moist, scaleless skin” and “their slow gentleness” (133), a description notable for the emphasis it places on the tactile qualities of the creatures. However, Kroetsch’s treatment of Vera Lang signals the existence of essentialism in *What the Crow Said*. Women and indigenous characters are associated with an “audile-tactile” connection with nature, while (white) men are attributed with a visual bias linked with the negative aspects of modernization and mechanization.

Other critics have commented on the role of women in the novel. Kathleen Wall draws attention to the binary oppositions of “man and woman, culture and nature” in the novel (93), highlighting the way in which women are depicted as being “chthonic,” thereby being associated with the earth itself (92-3). Similarly, Linda Hutcheon remarks that in the novel it is Kroetsch’s men who are “print-oriented, who are therefore maimed and destroyed by their need to imprint themselves in a visual

manner on their place and time,” in contrast with “His women, earthy and fecund, [who] exist in another world, one closer to the natural yet ritualised continuity of folk traditions” (54). Hutcheon’s insights are flawed, however, as she does not recognize that Rita and Vera Lang are writers, and that Liebhaber is the only male character who is associated with print. I argue that “modernity-oriented” is a more accurate description of the men in *What the Crow Said* than Hutcheon’s term “print-oriented.” Interestingly, Peter Thomas takes an entirely different line, equating the men in the text with oral culture, the women with written (103). Although he makes different associations, Thomas’s key point that in *What the Crow Said* “the worlds of men and women are fatally separated” (101) is precisely that made by Hutcheon and Wall. Each of these readings indicates that Kroetsch is making extensive use of binary oppositions. Christine Jackman suggests that the novel demonstrates Kroetsch’s ambivalence towards binary oppositions such as male/female, suggesting that they are “questioned, used, abused, deconstructed and recreated” (79). She argues that, while Kroetsch foregrounds the idea that binary oppositions are fictions, he “also refuses to resolve their dynamic relationship into a final answer” (80). However, in making this point, Jackman ignores the significance of that important image of “the naked circle of everything” which occurs at the end of the novel, which I see as a conclusive image of resolution.

It is clear that Kroetsch makes use of binary oppositions in *What the Crow Said*: men are associated with the “visual” technologies of modernity, while in contrast women exemplify oral culture and an audile-tactile focus on sensory interplay. In particular, Tiddy Lang is associated with tactility. She rescues Liebhaber from a snowstorm and massages him back to life in a scene reminiscent of Martha Proudfoot resurrecting Hazard Lepage in *The Studhorse Man*: “She caressed his

forehead. She touched the thickness of his eyebrows, the black of his mustache. She touched more snow to his sharp, muscled shoulders. She rubbed more snow into the hair of his chest, she rubbed his belly and the muscles tightened under her hands” (21). Tiddy nurses Liebhaber back to health through the sense of touch, in a scene which evokes both maternal and erotic images: “She rubbed his frost-burned skin with baby oil, dusted his behind with baby powder. Some nights she slept in the same bed; she held Liebhaber in her arms to sooth his muttering; lovingly, she caressed him down into sleep” (29). Kroetsch goes on to cement the connection between Tiddy’s sensory immersion and her role as mother: before her pregnancy is revealed the men around her are intrigued by “her shifting moods, her explosions of gaiety, her long silences, her moments of song, her unexpected touching of a forearm, a bare neck [...]” (36).

Besides the sense of touch, Tiddy is also associated with taste and smell. She encourages the men of Big Indian to forsake their 151-day card game, which represents the controlling order that Kroetsch associates with modernity in microcosm. By merely stating the food that she has in her house, Tiddy conveys the sensory pleasures that the male card-players have been depriving themselves of: “Some homemade bread. Fresh out of the oven. With homemade butter and homemade apricot jam,” “Some fresh pancakes. With warmed-up chokecherry jelly,” “Fresh eggs,” and “A quart of sausages. Some raw-fried potatoes with onion...” (111). Immediately upon hearing Tiddy’s words, a young man named Eddie Brausen begins to lose deliberately as he remembers the sensory immersion that has been denied to him by his participation in the shmier game: “a clean bed, and the splash of water on his face in the morning, and a warm kitchen smelling of homemade bread; he remembered the color of whole strawberries in a tin of strawberry jam, and the

laughter of women and children, and the sound of a fiddle being tuned” (112). As the men arrive at Tiddy’s house, her mother pours them coffee, and the aroma is said to “lift the frost from the frozen cheeks of the gasping and puffing men” (113), which Neil Randall describes as a “life-giving action” (94). Even the smell of coffee can physically touch people in the context of the haptic atmosphere of Tiddy’s home. In Kroetsch’s essentialist representation of Tiddy Lang, it is clear that her sensory wholeness is therapeutic to the men around her. She heals their fragmented states of being by means of her “tactile” womanly skills of mothering, loving and cooking, enabling them to recapture sensory harmony. Like the Natives in *Gone Indian* and *Badlands*, the women in *What the Crow Said* are important less in their own right than because their instinctive sensory harmony can teach visually-biased “Gutenberg Men” to remember their other senses.

At the conclusion of the novel, when Tiddy makes love with Liebhaber, Kroetsch description highlights her complete sensory immersion. She experiences the sense of touch: “She liked the slow drip, between her thighs, and the rough caress of the towel [...] She liked the tenderness of her love-swollen body, the spent heaviness of Liebhaber’s breathing” (192); and she arouses Liebhaber with her hands: “she touched him hard with her long, careful fingers” (192). She listens to the noises inside and outside the bedroom: “She heard the bed squeaking again,” “She heard the ball, thrown against the bedroom wall; she heard the silence, and in the silence she heard Liebhaber’s breathing, his breathing against her left ear” (192). Through his sexual union with Tiddy, Liebhaber is also immersed into the complete sensory environment that he has been divorced from during his previous existence as the archetypal Gutenberg man: “His tongue finds the warmth, the heat of her skin, the first small hairs” (194), he listens to the talking crow, and “He tastes his own semen on Tiddy’s

belly” (195). Similar to the indigeneity of the Beavers in *Gone Indian* and Anna Yellowbird in *Badlands*, Tiddy Lang’s femininity marks her as the representative of an alternative lifestyle that refutes the values privileged by modernity. In this respect, she is a “pathfinder” for Liebhaber, and her ultimate worth is judged upon her ability to rehabilitate this “Gutenberg man” into the realm of the senses.

The women in Kroetsch’s novel epitomize the antimodern desire for complete sensory union with nature. For example, Vera Lang is impregnated by bees at the start of the novel as she sleeps “in a patch of wild flowers on the edge of the valley,” an area that has escaped modernization as it is “too rough for wheat farming,” and where “the crocuses bloomed in spring as they had always bloomed, the buffalo beans cracked yellow, the violets and the buttercups and the shooting stars took their turn” (1). People later claim to have “smelled the moment too: the crocuses and cold earth smell, the smell of spring earth, breaking alive” (6). Vera’s sexual encounter with the bees is an audile-tactile one: she cries out with “that fierce and passionate and desperate ululation” (6), and she writhes, “moving, not able not to move, crushing the silken stems of the crocus bed, breaking the petals back from their pollen-yellow tongues” (6). It is particularly significant that Kroetsch repeats many of these natural images in the last paragraph of the novel, where Vera’s sister Cathy observes the nature that surrounds her: “She is barefoot. The mud and the water and the first thrust of the green grass feel good to her feet. Sometimes she stops to look at a crocus, wet and closed. The crows are calling. Sometimes she stops in a patch of buffalo beans, stooping to wonder when they will bloom” (195). As Susan Rudy Dorscht suggests, this passage indicates that “the ‘natural’ has been restored” (79). Kroetsch’s association of women with nature is a form of essentialism that continues a tradition which McLuhan traces back to romantic writers of the nineteenth century, who

believed ““The figure of woman”” to be resistant to the dominant visual bias of the Gutenberg era: “Her haptic bias, her intuition, her wholeness entitle her to marginal status as a Romantic figure” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 212).⁷ For Kroetsch, such romantic associations between women and sensory wholeness still hold fast.

Furthermore, Kroetsch connects women with idealized indigenous peoples in the novel. While the men of Big Indian declare war against the sky, the town’s women desire to use oral contact with the natural world to learn about it: “All the women wanted to ask the black crow: what’s that buzz, up there in the sky? The black crow would have told them” (175). The novel’s most significant native character, the Cree Joe Lightning, is attuned to nature and attempts to make dialogue with the sky. Kroetsch makes it clear that, unlike the white men in the town who are obsessed with the controlling violence that he associates with modernity, Joe belongs to a different realm where nature still retains its importance: “Joe Lightning was opposed to the war against the sky; he believed in the union of the elements” (139). Kathleen Wall optimistically suggests that Kroetsch is “Playing, perhaps, with the stereotype of the native as ‘natural man’” (99), but in the light of my exploration of Kroetsch’s use of Native figures in his previous novels, it is clear that he is continuing the antimodern tradition that idealizes the “primitive” indigene’s integral relationship with nature. Rather than making war, Joe wishes to find out more about the sky by temporarily capturing an eagle and communicating with it. Although Joe’s tactic backfires, and he ends up being caught in the eagle’s talons and carried into the sky, it is significant that when he falls, he survives the fall itself (unlike those men like Skandl, Lapanne and O’Holleran, who are in thrall to technology), only to drown in a toilet pit because

⁷ While McLuhan also remarks that by 1929 women had been “homogenized by means of the movies and photo advertising” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 212), it is significant that Kroetsch’s town of Big Indian lacks the aspects of modernity – photo ads and motion pictures – that McLuhan suggests modernize women, “reduc[ing] her to uniformity and repeatability and specialism” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 212).

those who could have saved him “had on their Sunday clothes” (143). Kroetsch’s contempt is targeted at the people who place more value on smart clothing than saving a man’s life, indicating his distaste for the intrusion of the superficial aspects of modernity into the rural town of Big Indian.

There remains an intriguing paradox about *What the Crow Said*. In the novel, Kroetsch portrays the Lang women as nurturing, exhibiting a keen understanding of nature, and being in tune with the highly-valued concepts of orality and the audile-tactile. Furthermore, they are so excessively fertile that they can be impregnated by bees, by a man without a penis, by the ambiance of a crowd of fighting hockey spectators, and even by a ghost. The question that arises is, why do these women need men in their lives? Men who are clearly associated with the corrupting influence of modernity? The answer lies in the crucial image of “the naked circle of everything” (193) as an image of heterosexual union. Far from extolling fragmentation and the dissolution of traditional gender divisions in the name of a liberated postmodern subjectivity, Kroetsch is reiterating long-standing concepts about the necessity for men and women to come together to create a whole. When Liebhaber ends the war with the sky by firing Vera Lang’s bees into the sky with a cannon, the terminology is that of union of the sexes: “Liebhaber [...] would fertilize the barren sky” (163). Significantly, this is an act of “love” not war, as Wall points out (102), and is therefore a triumph of the desire for organic unity over the adulation of mechanization associated with modernity. In *Labyrinths of Voice*, Kroetsch suggests that Liebhaber’s actions are those of a man “desperately trying to make sense” by “shooting the bees into the skies,” hoping to “somehow just return things to a primal myth of total fertilization, and let them start over” (163). Although Kroetsch suggests in this interview that he is critiquing Liebhaber’s “absurd act” (163), within the context of

the novel itself Liebhaber actually *does* “return things to a primal myth of total fertilization”: as a result of his actions, rain begins to fall once again in the drought-stricken region. Kroetsch evades the conservative implications of the desire for organic wholeness and closure clearly expressed in this novel. In bed with Tiddy, Liebhaber remembers his fertilization of the sky with bees, recalling that “He knocked them high, shot them into the one androgynous moment of heaven and earth” (193). Even when Kroetsch makes reference to the concept of androgyny, this is not seen as something which disrupts traditional gender roles, but functions instead an image of completeness and of organic unity.

In many of his discussions of *What the Crow Said*, Kroetsch suggests that this is an “open” text. In *The Crow Journals*, he describes this novel as “the opening through the possibilities of rigorous convention into something open, something coming apart” (66). He makes many references to “openness” in his interviews with Kenyon, where he valorizes Borges and Cervantes for producing texts that are “open” (9), suggesting that breaking boundaries “does open us up to a kind of seeing” (11), and praising magic realism as an “opening up of the story possibilities” (11) (a phrase repeated almost verbatim later in the interview [17]). However, Kroetsch actually ends his novel with conventional images of closure: a heterosexual union, and the coming of spring that signals that Big Indian has returned to a conventional seasonal cycle. Ultimately, the message of *What the Crow Said* is that organic unity can be achieved through the rejection of modernity, immersion in an audile-tactile sensory environment represented by heterosexual union in a rural environment, and a return to nature. He has remarked that, in *What the Crow Said*, we are “always in the world” (*Crow Journals* 23), but does not recognize that his idealized countryside is as much

an invention of the antimodern tradition as the ideals of urban utopias are myths of a futuristic modernity.

Chapter 6: *Alibi* and *The Puppeteer*

In a passage from his “Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*,” Northrop Frye contrasts two nineteenth-century American naïve paintings. He describes the first, Erastus Salisbury Field’s “Historical Monument of the American Republic,” as “a prophetic vision of the skyscraper cities of the future, of the tremendous technological will to power of our time and the civilization it has built, a civilization now gradually imposing a unity of culture and habits of life all over the globe” (17). The other, “The Peaceable Kingdom” by Edward Hicks, has in its background a depiction of a truce between Quakers and Native Americans, while in the foreground is “a group of animals, lions, tigers, bears, oxen, illustrating the prophecy of Isaiah about the recovery of innocence in nature” (18). Frye suggests that the second painting, representing “the reconciliation of man with nature,” encapsulates a sense of “the haunting vision of a serenity in the natural” which he associates with Canadian literature, going so far as to call this tradition the “quest for the peaceable kingdom” (18).¹ In *Alibi* (1983), Kroetsch reveals his engagement with the antimodern ideal of the “peaceable kingdom,” a phrase that appears verbatim within the text (232). Both this novel and its sequel *The Puppeteer* (1992) demonstrate the continuation of Kroetsch’s longing for the restoration of sensory unity in the idealised realms of the rural environment and the wilderness. These texts also reveal his lingering abhorrence for the technologies of modernity that he suggests lead to fragmentation rather than wholeness of being.

¹ It is significant in the light of his cultural nationalism that Frye elides the history of American antimodernism of the type represented both in Hicks’s painting and in the later cultural texts explored by Lears, using this work of art to typify antimodernism as being artistically dominant in Canadian culture.

As in Kroetsch's previous novels, there is a strong undercurrent of distaste for modern technology in *Alibi*. The protagonist is William Dorfen, known as Dorf, an acquisitions agent for the renowned collector Jack Deemer, a Calgary oil baron. Dorf's occupation means that he travels the world to purchase additions to Deemer's collections. *Alibi* focuses on Dorf's attempts to purchase a spa on behalf of Deemer. At the novel's outset, Dorf epitomizes urban modernity. He values modern technology, and later reveals that Deemer employed him because of his thesis on "cash registers as works of art," indicating his fascination with the machines of modernity in his recollection that "a cash register gave birth to IBM" (184-5). However, Dorf's way of life leads to his sensory fragmentation. Subject to Deemer's whims, Dorf lives such a transient lifestyle that he suffers from "the ultimate case of jet lag" (123). Essentially, *Alibi* charts Dorf's "cure" from his condition, which is occasioned by immersing himself in the earth itself and by abandoning modernity through retreating to the wilderness. However, Kroetsch pessimistically suggests at the end of the novel that the influence of modernity is too pervasive to enable his protagonist to achieve complete organic unity with the earth and nature. As the conclusion of the novel shows, Dorf is intruded upon in his woodland retreat by a motorized boat: when he uses the modern technology of the gun to defend his territory, he becomes an exile from the natural environment of the wilderness.

Throughout *Alibi*, Kroetsch associates images of violence and death with modern technology. In particular, automobiles are associated with destruction. Dorf's car skids on concealed ice in the Rockies (9), he hits an animal in a blizzard (18), and he bumps into another car in Banff (53). Driving in England, Dorf's sister Sylvia "once again confuse[s], briefly, left and right, and damned near hit[s] a lorry head on" (81). Dorf and Sylvia have several other near-accidents involving cyclists and sheep

(82, 94); in fact, Dorf goes so far as to describe their hired car as a “chariot of destruction” (83). Other forms of motorized transport are hazardous: after several hair-raising bus journeys in the Greek islands Dorf comments “We risked our lives each morning” (151), and later, when back in Canada, he is injured when he falls from a bus (215). The destructive potential connected with motorized vehicles is foregrounded when Dorf’s lover Julie Magnuson is reported to have been killed in a car accident in Portugal while driving Dorf’s hired Mercedes-Benz (192).

However, it is not until very late in the novel that Dorf is finally convinced of the negative impact of the internal combustion engine on humanity. Earlier, Dorf identifies himself by reference to the car that he drives, a blue Mercedes-Benz which he describes as being his “only means of defense” (132), a statement that recalls McLuhan’s musings on the motorcar: “The car has become the carapace, the protective and aggressive shell, of urban and suburban man” (*Understanding Media* 224-5). McLuhan also writes about the violence of car accidents, and suggests that people are “processing and siphoning it off into some form of fantasy for compensation and balance” (219). In *Alibi* Dorf overtly fantasizes about the positive attributes of the car as a form of compensation for its destructive potential, as he tells the spa doctor Manny de Medeiros: “Is it not peculiar, doctor, that the vehicle which kills so many thousands of persons each week, each day, I suppose, is also a vehicle for the liberation of the spirit; it becomes, for us, almost the avenue to what used to be called the soul” (132). Initially Dorf is in favour of technology, whilst Manny is opposed to its influence. For Manny, the rural spa town of Luso is “a quaint and lovely place of ancient medical practices, an escape from the vital reality of our daily speed” (132-3). In contrast, Dorf expresses his desire for nature to combine with technology (“The flower and the machine. They must marry, or we all are dead”

[133]). At this point in the novel, Dorf's attitude indicates his ambivalence towards modernization. This ambivalence is short-lived, soon giving way to the "rigid polarities" represented by complete rejection of modernity (Berman 24). It is particularly interesting to read this passage in the light of later events in the book, in which Dorf and Manny effectively alter positions. In the final pages of the novel Dorf wishes to protect Canadian nature, as represented by a pair of osprey chicks, from a motorized canoe helmed by Manny. What seems to drive Dorf to this rejection of modernity is his immersion in the earth of the mud spa in Lapsi in Greece, and also his knowledge of the death of Julie in a motor accident. In particular, after Julie's death Dorf is disheartened by the fact that the police are more concerned with the destruction of the rented Mercedes than with Julie's death: "All the cops actually wanted was for me to fill out a lengthy report concerning the car. Automobiles, after all, are possessions of the system and must be protected" (193). Kroetsch's text suggests that the modern, mechanized society has its priorities wrong when the fate of a car takes precedence over a human life.

The imagery relating to car accidents evokes one of the novel's intertexts, Jean-Luc Godard's film *Weekend*, which is explicitly referred to when his prospective lover Karen Strike, herself a filmmaker, asks Dorf if he has ever seen the movie (19). In this film a middle-class couple participate in the frenzied, bourgeois, automobile-obsessed culture of 1960s France, witnessing horrific car accidents before being kidnapped by revolutionaries. *Weekend* is a film that expresses "total disillusionment with French society, which is conceived of as monolithically bourgeois, brutalized by its own consumer ideology" (Cook 193). Its most famous sequence is a tracking shot of a mile-long traffic jam interspersed with crashed vehicles, culminating in a scene of a road strewn with dead bodies, which functions as an encapsulation of the

dehumanising effects of contemporary technology. However, while Godard's attack on consumerist lifestyles exemplified by the motorcar is a critique of class based on "Marxist-Leninist" principles,² Kroetsch's distaste for the technologies of modernity is a more generalized antimodern abhorrence of the destructive impact of such technologies on humanity's relationship with nature.

While *Alibi* has been read as a postcolonial novel,³ I argue that Kroetsch's critique of imperialism within the text is another manifestation of his antimodernism. Kroetsch associates empires primarily with technological progress and modernization, and for this reason he holds them in contempt. Just before Dorf shoots at Manny he sees him as an explorer: "peering toward the forested shoreline, one last Magellan come to discover us" (235). Manny is linked with a destructive modernity, as the artificial noise of his outboard motor, "a high and insistent whine", causes Dorf "distress" (235). The idea of city-building as "progress" is also attacked by Kroetsch. At one point, Dorf and Sylvia travel to Bath, where they visit the Royal Crescent: "that architectural triumph of aristocratic lunacy based on the bleeding of an entire empire" (85). Even ancient empires are associated with their technologies, but also with the warning that these are vulnerable to the ravages of time: "The Roman Empire itself turned into a collection of broken stones and a warming system, a hypocaust system that doesn't any longer work" (88).

As in *What the Crow Said*, in *Alibi* Kroetsch emphasizes the negative effects of modernity on sensory integration by describing people who have been maimed by modern technology. Dorf encounters "farmers from the prairies with arms missing, fed into machines" (209), a man who has lost an eye in a sawmill accident (209), and "a man who wore a scar down the middle of his face, as if he'd been split open with

² *Weekend's* cinematographer Raoul Coutard describes the film using these terms in an interview included on the DVD release of the film.

³ See Gunilla Florby's postcolonial reading of *Alibi* in *The Margin Speaks* (107-28).

an axe and put together by a blind seamstress” (54). His employer Jack Deemer, an oil baron who is representative of all that Kroetsch believes to be wrong with modernity, uses workers who share his obsessions, men with “macho backgrounds that made them willing to lose a thumb or a hand or a leg or a life to find oil while working for a cheapo driller who might or might not pay them in the end” (25). Dorf himself is prone to injury as a result of modern technologies: he scalds his penis in a shower due to mislabelled taps (21), and he breaks a leg in an avalanche that has been deliberately caused by gunfire (66).

Within the text, nature exists in marked contrast with the destructive world of modern technology. Dorf reveals his guilt over a childhood incident when he uses technology against nature: “I pointed a shotgun up at the bottom of a crow’s nest and, to my horror, my transfixed horror, the sudden explosion brought a crow fluttering, wounded, down at my feet, a crow, unable to fly, that only looked at me and waited” (33). This incident recalls a similar event in the childhood of Martin Lang, the protagonist of *When Sick for Home* (182). For both characters, the discovery of their culpability in the destruction of the natural world has important resonances for their subsequent respect for nature and its creatures, marking their turn towards “the quest for the peaceable kingdom,” to use Northrop Frye’s phrase. Dorf enjoys visiting spas which remain in touch with the natural world, praising a spring in Hungary “where hippopotami breed with great abandon in the warm and inspiring waters” (105). Later, he returns to this image when he visits Deadman Spring, imagining that the pool at the spa could accommodate two mating hippopotami (201), and he also likens himself to a hippopotamus (227) in an image that echoes the description of Johnnie Backstrom’s underwater sexual union with Helen Murdoch in *The Words of My Roaring*, another example of audile-tactile immersion in the earth’s elements.

The spas that Dorf values most highly are those which retain some kind of connection with nature, unlike the overdeveloped urban spa at Bath where “Something or other had poisoned the healing waters” (87). In marked contrast are the mud baths at Lapsi in Greece, where Dorf has an epiphanic experience. It is indicative of Kroetsch’s disdain for modern technology that Dorf, the international air-traveller, is happiest when he is confronted with a sensation of universal humanity in the mud of the Greek spa at Lapsi. Encouraged by the Greek men (and the androgynous spa healer “smelly woman”), who paint mud masks on their faces to disguise their individuality, Dorf paints his face with mud and joins the spa: “We were floating heads, all of us, joined in the mud, joined to the mud. In that mud, there, up to my neck, to my chin, I realized, for the first time in my life, my mud self. I was in touch with the world” (167). This imagery of joining and wholeness is crucial to the transformation that Dorf undergoes in the novel, from being a man fragmented by the technologies of the modern age, to becoming at one with the organic union of humanity and earth. Emerging from the spa, Dorf tells Karen he feels “muddily human” (172). Dorf’s need to feel like he is part of the earth is evident in his refusal to wash the spa’s mud from his body:

The mud was quick to develop its own crust in that sun. I became a strolling mud pie, a knight coated in muddy armor, a wilful clod of the earth itself; I might grow grass, grow bushes, flowers; I might become my own vegetable garden, sprouting beans and radishes; I might ask to be planted, and harvested too. (175)

The mud, which has restored his sense of humanity, also roots him, allowing Dorf to see himself as something organic and part of the earth.⁴ Even the image of a knight in armour evokes a prominent antimodern (masculine) ideal, representing “a premodern alternative to lackluster ‘industrial man’” (Lears 101).

In this crucial section, it is clear that Kroetsch imbues his text with images relating to the body and to tactility. He focuses on Dorf’s sensations in the spa as a means of expressing the possibility of sensory interplay, achievable in and through immersion in the natural environment. The example of Dorf in *Alibi* suggests that nature can restore the sensory imbalances of a “Gutenberg” people “out of tune” with the world that surrounds them due to the predominance of international, jet-set lifestyles. At Lapsi, Dorf’s senses are engaged. He inhales the odour of the mud – “infinitely old and decomposed” – and realizes “it wasn’t a bad smell” (161). He is initially repelled by the mud baths: “I couldn’t quite immerse myself in that stinking thick mud where all the sick and the maimed did their suffering and their hoping. And their pissing and their bleeding and their farting. I couldn’t do it” (165). Cut off from fellow human beings within the segmented, fragmented and compartmentalized Gutenberg society of which he is a member, Dorf initially experiences repulsion at any idea of shared sensation, as well as disgust towards bodily functions.

It is only when he finally has the courage to join the crowd in the spa that he experiences the sensory interplay that re-connects him both with humanity and the earth itself: “it felt good, that stinking, thick mud”; when he immerses his genitals in the mud he feels “a shiver [...] through [his] whole body” (166). Dorf is transformed by his experience, as he involves his sensory organs in his spa experience, drawing

⁴ This scene also echoes imagery in *Badlands*, in which Claude McBride, a man presumed to be drowned, is discovered alive, naked except for a coating of mud. McBride’s clothing in mud is a rebirth for him, and thus reborn he chooses to abandon the deadly expedition of William Dawe, and return to his wife and family, and “his quarter-section of rich black dirt, his greening wheat [...] his peas in blossom in the morning sun, his potatoes swelling in the dark earth” (51).

circles of mud around his eyes, ears and mouth, and feeling organic union with the mud around him: “My heart was warm inside me, the world was my body. My whole body became a heart, a heart beating in the mud world” (167). Dorf also loses his sensory inhibitions: “Deeply, I farted, steady and strong, shitting a little, possibly” (167). The climax of Dorf’s visit to Lapsi is, appropriately, an orgasm achieved when he is touched by a crowd of women in the mud: “they touched with eager care my pinched buttocks, my lips and my ears, my mud-nuzzling groin. My balls were cradled in a dozen different hands, my innocent cock was stroked and seized and caressed and admired and reviled and yanked and twisted and encouraged and skinned alive by a dozen mud-bespattered and playful women” (179). This sexual experience in the mud emphasises the sensory connection that Dorf has achieved through submersion in the earth itself. Upon his return to Canada, Dorf experiences a newfound respect for the natural world.

In having his protagonist turn towards the privileging of the natural world, Kroetsch demonstrates his contempt for urban modernity. Within the novel, cities are represented negatively. Calgary with its grid pattern is likened to the rows of coffins laid out on a skating rink due to an undertakers’ strike (195), and it is said to be a place of “nightmares”, where Dorf hears the “whine and fear” of cars, and wishes that he was out of the city on Nose Hill (197).⁵ The urban spa at Bath has “poisoned” waters (87). Besides Bath, Banff is another spa that is corrupted with urban modernity: as Florby points out, “In his quest for the perfect spa – the place of healing and wholeness, the source – Dorf initially rejects Banff, a part of Canada that has become inauthentic, a place reserved for the foot-loose well-to-do” (“Self-reflexions”

⁵ Nose Hill is associated with trickster figure Old Man. Kroetsch has remarked that “there are many other such markings – the Hand Hills, the Belly river which I believe was renamed the Oldman River. And so on – a fabulous way to map, joining the landscape to the body” (Personal correspondence, 5 August 2004). In terms of Kroetsch’s understanding of Native myth, Nose Hill therefore represents the organic union of the human body and the natural world.

205). In contrast, Deadman Spring is a different kind of spa, integrated into nature and the wilderness:

And Deadman Spring exceeds my fondest hope. Here on an edge, between a lake and a mountain. You can hardly see, hardly find the place where the spa is, hardly know where to turn off the lakeshore road, swing up, find the parking lot [...] These native trees. The Engelmann spruce. The western larch. The hemlock, the alder, the birch, the pine. The Douglas fir. The avalanche-streaked forest, the snow-raked forest, reaching green to a glacier's lip. (200)

In the final section of the novel, Dorf retreats from his urban, international lifestyle to become a hermit in a forest shack close to Deadman Spring.

By having his protagonist achieve a sense of organic wholeness by rejecting urban modernity and embracing a wilderness existence, Kroetsch participates in the conservative tradition of the unifying Canadian myth of the wilderness, a key literary trope since the nineteenth-century writings of Major John Richardson, Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill, renamed the “quest for the peaceable kingdom” by Frye. Earlier in the twentieth century, the antimodernist artistic movements of the Algonquin School and the Group of Seven furthered the imaginative significance of the wilderness in Canadian culture.⁶ In this context Dorf's action in shooting at a foreigner, the Portuguese dwarf Manny de Medeiros, fearing that he will disturb the ospreys which are part of Canada's natural environment, is highly problematic. Dorf's statement that his warning shot to Manny was to “announce my boundaries” indicates that he has come to equate himself with the wilderness where he now lives (236).

⁶ For detailed discussions of the Algonquin School and the Group of Seven as antimodern cultural nationalists, see Ryan Edwardson's “A Canadian Modernism: The Pre-Group of Seven ‘Algonquin School,’ 1912-17,” and Linda Jessup's “Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven.”

Turning his sight away from the drowning doctor, Dorf watches the baby ospreys make their first flight: “they found and lifted, above them, the blue sky; they tore, in their innocent talons, the sadness from my heart” (239). Dorf’s happiness lies in the Canadian wilderness. He acquires a sense of organic unity through his contact with the natural environment, although his respite from the sensory fragmentation of modernity is brief. Kroetsch’s sequel to *Alibi*, *The Puppeteer*, reveals that Dorf has become an international fugitive since Manny’s disappearance.

One of the most complex aspects of this text is Kroetsch’s relationship with writing and orality. For Kroetsch, as much as for McLuhan, the turn from an oral to a written culture is a debasement. Dorf feels threatened by the written word, which is used to control his actions: he describes a message from Jack Deemer “waiting like a bomb” in his mailbox, and comments that Deemer’s messages are often “scrawled with instructions for which there is no explanation, no place to seek clarification” (7), emphasizing the one-way nature of this communication. Dorf feels stifled by the written word. At one point he attempts to talk to Karen Strike, but is silenced by Karen’s act of writing, finding that he “couldn’t speak” when he discovers Karen is “making notes on the goddamned world” (16). It is only when Dorf and Karen are able to talk to each other that their sense of connection deepens: “We talked that night. We told each other stories. Perhaps that is what changed our relationship. After all those years of merely acknowledging each other” (22). Dorf sees his own orality as something capable of piecing together fragments into unity. Referring to his employer Deemer’s purchases, he comments that “The collection itself only confirms the discontinuity of this scattered world; it’s my talk that puts it together” (211). For Dorf, talk creates the possibility of re-connecting people and objects in the fragmented modern world.

Within the novel there are several instances of the erotic potential of the audile-tactile senses. When they are unable to make love, Dorf tells Karen of another erotic encounter while she masturbates (24-6). During a ménage-à-trois with Julie and Manny, Dorf emphasises the erotic potential of complementing physical contact with speech: “We talked. And having talked, having spoken, we touched, our fingers joining into the conversation” (130). At the climax of the novel, an orgy takes place in the darkness of Deadman Spring. A fuse blows, a failure of technology that eradicates reliance on the visual sense, leading to a multitude of sexual experiences realized through orality and tactility. Dorf describes the interaction between speech and touch, and draws attention to the idea that speech *is* touch: “The flesh is fornicator with its called name. We speak the soft arousal of lilted words. Thus, the tongue, and the tongue, distantly touching” (226). Plunged into darkness, people begin to call out names such as Cook, Vasco da Gama, Vermeer, and Pausanias (227). Each of these historical personages can, in some way, be seen as emissaries of encroaching visual culture manifested by European art and imperialism: by stripping these “names” of the sense that gave them power, sight, Kroetsch levels the field for the other senses. The language used in the passage is focused primarily on the realm of the audile-tactile senses – “The surprise of hips touching hips in the unseeable dark,” “The hand to the belly’s sudden gasp,” “the wet, invisible embrace” – culminating in an image of tactile organic union, “The all embrace of all of us”(sic) (227).

The oral and the tactile, therefore, are highly valued senses in Kroetsch’s text, signalling his desire to counteract the visual bias of the Gutenberg era. However, this manoeuvre is complicated by the fact that the text exists in written form, and takes the form of an edited version of Dorf’s journal. Significantly, it is Karen Strike, a filmmaker associated with visual culture, who gives Dorf the gift of the journal in

which he records the events that transpire during his search for a spa. How does Kroetsch attempt to overcome the visual bias of the Gutenberg world in a novel that exists in visual form? One of the ways in which he endeavours to do so is by establishing connections between writing and organic imagery; for example, Dorf announces that he tends his journal “as a gardener tends his sprouts and blossoms” (135). As with Rita Lang in *What the Crow Said*, Kroetsch connects Dorf’s writing with his body, and with sensations other than the visual. In the crudest sense, this is achieved when the pages of Dorf’s journal become his toilet paper (234). The connection between writing and the body is enhanced by Dorf’s use of a typewriter: “I type all and everything onto legal size rag paper, not dropping so much as a letter; I happen to be something of a fanatic at a typewriter” (231). In Kroetsch’s *Crow Journals*, he indicates that the typewriter is an instrument that reinserts an audile quality into the act of writing: “my ears ache from listening to the typewriter making words my whole being” (63).⁷

Ultimately, *Alibi* is Kroetsch’s portrayal of a man who has been fractured and fragmented by the “Gutenberg” technologies of the modern age. Through his protagonist Dorf, Kroetsch explores the impact of international and transnational lifestyles upon organic unity and sensory balance. In Patricia Waugh’s work on metafiction, international travel is paradigmatic of the postmodern experience. Waugh’s description of an incident from Bridgid Brophy’s *In Transit* (1969), is typical of the way in which she feels international travel is used in late twentieth-century writing: “The hero/heroine sits in an airport lounge, his/her brain inundated

⁷ McLuhan demonstrates an ambivalent attitude to the typewriter, claiming that while “the typewriter has contributed greatly to the familiar forms of the homogenized specialism and fragmentation that is print culture, it has also caused an integration of functions,” as it “fuses composition and publication” (259-60). He also relates in an anecdote that Henry James was so fond of the sound of his typewriter that he “called for his Remington to be worked near his bedside” (260). For McLuhan, then, as well as for Kroetsch, although the typewriter is a piece of technology, it contributes to the redistribution of the senses, enabling the recapturing of audile-tactile sensations in the act of writing.

by a macaronic *bricolage* of the jargons and languages of contemporary society [...] What the airport lounge offers [...] is flight, duty-freedom, escape from identity into language, existence as fiction” (146). If this is the case for *Alibi*’s protagonist Dorf, it is clear that Kroetsch sees the international lifestyle as indicative of what is wrong with modern society. By retreating to the wilderness, Dorf recaptures a sense of unified identity that has been denied to him by his participation in modernity. Immersion in the natural environment offers Dorf a sense of reality, counteracting the sense of “existence as fiction” which Waugh associates with late twentieth-century modernity. Once again, it is clear that Kroetsch’s version of postmodernism is a type of antimodernism.

Interesting comparisons can be made with one of Kroetsch’s contemporaries, the poet and critic Frank Davey. In *Post-National Arguments* Davey displays a dissatisfaction with modernity that is similar to that of Kroetsch in certain respects. However, rather than looking back nostalgically at an idealized pre-modern era, Davey laments the passing of the modern era itself, as represented in particular by the concept of the nation state. In this text Davey explores how writers have created a “post-national” ambiance in Canadian fiction since 1967, wherein any sense of national identity has been superseded by transnational entities such as aeroplanes, “international hotels” and “world-class postcard cities” (263, 259, 266). *Alibi*’s protagonist Dorf exemplifies the resulting “individual alienation” that Davey sees afflicting the protagonists of such “post-national” texts (266). Davey has commented that the “internationalism” of novels such as *Alibi* is reflected in the depiction of upper- and middle-class Canadians as a plane-hopping jet-set who find that their “social relations” are disrupted, “close friendship is difficult and group affiliation virtually absent” (251). There is evidence to support Davey’s comments within

Kroetsch's text, as Dorf remarks "When you're out of the city half of each year, when you never know when a message will send you off to Singapore for a dusty boxful of miniature Buddhas, you end up having few friends. I guess *none* would be a more accurate term" (20).

For both Davey and Kroetsch, modernization and cosmopolitanism have led to fragmentation and alienation. However, while Davey suggests that such negative consequences are connected to the loss of the ideal of the nation state, for Kroetsch it is the loss of 'authenticity' in modern life which is to blame. With typically antimodern sentiments, Kroetsch looks to pre-modern ideals to heal the fractured subjectivity of his characters. In this respect he differs from Davey. While Davey's primary form of post-nationalism refers to the kind of affluent, uprooted international travelling lifestyle practiced by Dorf, he does suggest that a second kind exists. This alternative form of post-nationalism stresses that characters can become part of a community that is based "on 'natural' or 'organic' metaphors" (253). Believing that this is a problematic solution, Davey argues these constructions imply the possibility of "a utopian Canada that can be vaguely more 'spiritual', less instrumental and directive, more 'natural' than other social possibilities, but only mysteriously attainable" (253, 254). Therefore, while both Davey and Kroetsch clearly indicate their sense that Canada has fallen from its ideal state due to modernization, each attributes the cause of this decline differently. For Davey, this problem is a feature of the postmodern era. For Kroetsch, however, the modern period as a whole is the time when he perceives (Canadian) humanity to have fallen from its pre-modern ideal status, resulting in the fragmentation of both the individual and the community. Davey suggests that the solution to this fragmentation is the recovery of interest in the political institutions of the nation state. For Kroetsch, the remedy is a rekindling of

sensory integration through audile-tactile contact with other human beings, as well as the development of a sense of connection with the earth itself. Davey retains faith in the institutions of modernity, while Kroetsch seeks reassurance in pre-modern ideals.

As I have argued in my analysis of *What the Crow Said*, Kroetsch uses imagery of heterosexual union as an emblem of organic unity, an idea that continues to permeate *Alibi*. When Dorf makes love with Julie, he thinks about the word “omphalos,” the Greek term for the centre of the world (128). Significantly, however, it is only through bringing together the opposite sexes that the reassurance of organic unity occurs for Kroetsch’s characters. This unity is represented either in heterosexual union or in the figure of the androgyne. Kroetsch lauds androgyny in the sequence set in the spa in Lapsi, when Kroetsch encounters a man with mud patterns drawn on the top of his skull, “the man with the cunt on his head” (167), who turns out to be the spa healer known as the “smelly woman” (178), and who, prior to Dorf’s leaving, “dr[aws], invisibly, slowly, with one finger, the pattern of an opening on the top of [his] head” (185), an indication that Dorf has acquired some elements of an androgynous organic wholeness through his mystical experiences in the mud of the spa.

The “smelly woman” is an androgynous figure who is constructed positively within the text, epitomizing wholeness in a modern world associated with fragmentation. Significantly, on their first encounter, Dorf initially believes the spa doctor Manny de Medeiros to be a woman because of his “long, flowing blond hair,” but is filled with “surprise” and “horror” when he discovers that Manny is “not only male, but a dwarf as well” (111). One of the reasons for Dorf’s horrified reaction is that, although a dwarf, Manny’s genitals are of a “normal” size, typical of a fully grown man: in other words, his genitals are disproportionately large for his small

frame (111). Manny is therefore constructed as hyper-masculine: his initially androgynous appearance is superficial, as he lacks the union of male and female elements that are essential components of Kroetsch's positive construction of the androgyne as epitome of sensory harmony.

While androgyny is seen as particularly valuable version of organic wholeness, homosexuality is represented as being entirely threatening. At the climax of the novel, the clientele of the spa at Deadman Spring participate in an audile-tactile orgy. Although this is a positive experience for many, for Dorf it ends in trauma: "I had been seized, caught from behind, surprised, ambushed, captured, taken" (227); "I was held tight, there in the cave. Someone had seized me in his arms. I assumed it to be a gesture of love and that was why I did not resist" (228). Later, Dorf reveals, "I was, by any legal definition, that final night, there, in Deadman Spring, I cannot write the word. Violated will have to do" (234). This act of violence robs Dorf of his sensory wholeness: "We live dumbly, now. And dumb I remain" (234). In Kroetsch's representations of sex, only heterosexual intercourse enables the sensory unity that counteracts the fragmentation of modern life. Elsewhere he has remarked on his desire to bring male and female "back together" (Twigg 111) imagining the sexes to be increasingly separated from each other, with men desiring modernization while women remain more rooted in nature; this opinion has resonances of the association made between women and nature in romantic discourse, as discussed by McLuhan (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 212). The idea that heterosexual union is a means for fragmented Gutenberg men to achieve sensory integration – a motif that appears repeatedly throughout Kroetsch's fiction – conceptually maintains the binary opposition of homo- and heterosexuality. While associating heterosexuality with the positive qualities of healing and harmony, Kroetsch connects homosexuality with

fragmentation, violence and sensory discord. In his next novel, *The Puppeteer*, Kroetsch continues to offer androgyny and heterosexual intercourse as means for participants in modernity to achieve de-fragmentation and sensory unity.

The Puppeteer is Kroetsch's sequel to *Alibi*. In the course of the narrative of *The Puppeteer*, it is revealed that Dorf has been an international fugitive since the events that end *Alibi*, eventually returning to Canada in the guise of a Greek Orthodox monk, and using the alias "Papa B." Jack Deemer, the wealthy oil baron for whom he had worked as a collector's agent, is hunting for Dorf, aiming to clear up the mysteries which remain unsolved in *Alibi*. Manny de Medeiros's corpse has never been recovered from the lake beside Deadman Spring, and Deemer, knowing that Manny was his wife Julie Magnuson's lover, is searching for his body. The body of Julie, who was supposedly killed in a car accident in *Alibi*, is also missing: the coffin that Manny had shipped to Deemer in Calgary turns out to have been empty "Except for some carefully distributed lead weights" (*The Puppeteer* 183). These revelations pave the way for the discovery that Manny and Julie have faked their deaths in order to escape from the control of Deemer.

In an interview with Lee Spinks, Kroetsch discusses Jack Deemer's role as a "collector" in *The Puppeteer*, commenting "I think he has a strong impulse to make the world cohere in any way possible. In a certain way, he's a modernist, I suppose, in my sense of what a modernist is" (15). As has been established, Kroetsch has repeatedly rejected what he calls "modernism," which he suggests aims at creating singularity and closure, in favour of a "postmodernism" that offers multiplicity and openness. However, Kroetsch's own fictional texts indicate that he does place a high value on closure, in his idealization of organic unity. This is borne out in *The Puppeteer*, in which Jack Deemer achieves sensory harmony by abandoning his

metropolitan life for a pastoral existence in a remote Greek village. While Kroetsch tells Spinks of his “fear of a single story,” ultimately the multiple strands of his complex narrative coalesce as it becomes the tale of Deemer’s salvation from modernity.

In *The Puppeteer*, Kroetsch continues his exploration of the interrelationship between the senses. As in *Alibi*, there is a writer figure, in this case Maggie Wilder, the author of a collection of short stories entitled *Trading Places*. In *The Puppeteer* Kroetsch offers alternative versions of the events that occur both within its pages and those of *Alibi*. He engages with the concept of different media – writing, photography, puppet shows and embroidery – although these are described in written form within the novel. In particular, Kroetsch turns his critical eye towards photography and writing, emphasizing the negative consequences that arise when these “hot” visual media fix events into an illusory finality, thereby closing off the sensory interplay that might lead to a more complete account. Other more unusual kinds of media are privileged over writing and photography in the novel. These include a puppet show and an embroidered wedding dress, neither of which depend solely upon the visual sense for their effects, but instead encourage the involvement of multiple senses. By means of their ability to enable participation and sensory interplay, the puppet show and the wedding dress represent positive, “cool” alternatives to the “hot” media of writing and photography. In *The Puppeteer*, photography and writing are “fixing” media. The puppet show and the embroidered wedding dress are the least fixing, most fluid and open forms of “telling” in the novel; furthermore, as types of “folk art,” they are imbued with connotations of antimodern authenticity.

Marshall McLuhan connects the technologies of photography and print, attributing to the invention of each of these media the same negative consequences:

“photography mirrored the external world automatically, yielding an exactly repeatable visual image. It was this all-important quality of uniformity and repeatability that had made the Gutenberg break between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance” (*Understanding Media* 190). Similarly, in his own critical work, Kroetsch makes reference to the “fixed” quality of photography in his reading of Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter*. As the frontispiece to his account of the life of the jazz musician Buddy Bolden, Ondaatje includes a photograph of Bolden’s jazz band. Kroetsch remarks upon the presence of the photograph: “Here is the ‘real thing’, anticipating, refusing, creating, destroying, the fiction that is to come. Photo: arrest. Killing. Going. The camera as weapon” (“The Exploding Porcupine” 112). Kroetsch’s terms are predominantly negative, linking photography with fixity and death. It is significant that in *The Puppeteer*, the filmmaker Karen Strike becomes a “still” photographer, thereby being closely aligned with the negative aspects attributed to the photograph.⁸ She is a more dangerous character in *The Puppeteer* than in *Alibi*.⁹ Her association with fixity is so powerful that she does not even need to be present to have an effect, as just thinking about her can paralyse: “the thought of Karen fixed Maggie into a literal stillness” (122). As a photographer, Karen’s adherence to visual composition is said to “restore the necessary order” (248). Her photographs mimic death by closing down the play of possible stories. At the end of the novel, Karen takes photographs of Papa B’s body as it is pulled to the top of the cliff (260). These images cement the permanence of Papa B’s demise, in contrast to the supposed drowning of Manny in *Alibi* which leaves no visual evidence.

⁸ As Kröller points out, the title of the documentary film that Karen is making in *Alibi* – “The Mechanics of Healing” – is suggestive of “Karen’s refusal to acknowledge the organic and, hence, disorderly” (74).

⁹ Florby comments that Karen “has turned into a sinister figure” in the sequel to *Alibi*, and summarizes Karen’s unpleasantness in *The Puppeteer*: “She is said to be malicious, taunting people with death [...] and she allegedly steals a bag containing a million dollars” (*The Margin Speaks* 131).

In his discussion of photography, McLuhan has remarked that “It is one of the peculiar characteristics of the photo that it isolates single moments in time” (*Understanding Media* 188). Kroetsch condemns this quality of isolation in *The Puppeteer*. He emphasizes the differences between an action and the photograph of this action. In one scene Maggie Wilder climbs playfully onto the shoulders of another character in the water of Deadman Spring: “Maggie put her hands on Fish’s shoulders. She gave a thrust with her legs and at the same time using her arms pulled herself upward; she made it; she was sitting on his shoulders; she closed her thighs against his neck; she steadied herself; she let go of his hair, raised her arms” (82). At this moment Karen Strike takes a photograph. This precisely detailed sequence of actions stands in marked contrast to the static image of the photograph, which is subsequently fetishized by Jack Deemer: “In the large black-and-white photograph, Maggie’s mouth is full and open, her breasts small, her stomach pulled into an exquisite, tight circle around her wet belly button as she raises her long arms in an offered embrace” (113). Deemer remarks that although Maggie is on Fish’s shoulders, he “is not in the photograph at all” (113). Fish is invisible in the photograph; it is therefore deceptive, emphasizing the fact that the camera “lies” by reducing a fluid sequence of events to a single fixed image.

In *Labyrinths of Voice* Kroetsch castigates photography for its imposition of fixity and stasis, remarking “There is nothing more grotesque, perhaps, than a snapshot which takes up one instant and suggests its incredible validity against all that time” (126), and suggesting that writers “usually seek the security of stasis when they use photographs” (128). However, Kroetsch is not wholly against photography, as he suggests that some photographs can have “generative power” (127). Although a photograph is static in itself, it may inspire another telling. These comments on

photography intersect with Kroetsch's treatment of the photographic image in *The Puppeteer*. Maggie and her husband Henry exchange opinions when they see a photograph of William Dorf in the Canadian Embassy in Athens following the disappearance of Manny de Medeiros. For Henry, the photograph "fixes" Dorf's guilt, shutting down all other possible alternatives: "Look at him. He's totally guilty. Look. His face is his confession'" (94). In contrast, for Maggie the image generates story possibilities: "All she wanted was a snapshot of the picture of the beardless man; it would fit into a story she was drafting" (93-94). The ambiguous qualities of fixity and fluidity demonstrated by photography interconnect with the idea of writing in the novel. The written word is seen in negative terms when it is used as a substitute for genuine sensory involvement in the word. This becomes apparent when Maggie is in the renowned gardens of the Villa D'Este near Rome, where instead of relishing what is around him, Fish lists writers who have dealt with the subject of gardening: "Read, he was telling her. Read Leon Battista Alberti. Read Martini. Maggie wanted him to tell her to look at the garden, but he was telling her to look at books" (180).¹⁰

By making his central figure Maggie Wilder a writer, Kroetsch is able to explore two contrasting ideas about writing: one that sees it as productive of a fixed entity, the other that sees it as processual and incomplete. In Kroetsch's valorization of incompleteness, he draws attention to the idea that the "totalized" printed text is in fact an example of modern fragmentation, despite its illusion of completeness. This "fragment" only appears to be whole because it conceals the fact that other material – and by implication, any alternative perspective – has been excluded. Furthermore, in his own writing, Kroetsch aims to evoke the effects of sensory interplay that will counteract the "hot" visual bias of the printed page. Therefore, Kroetsch offers

¹⁰ Maggie's attitude corresponds with the association between a preoccupation with books and a sense of being "cut off from 'reality,'" a prominent concern of antimodern thought since the nineteenth century (Lears 48).

contrasting perspectives on writing. Although he suggests that individuals may attempt to write totalizing narratives, Kroetsch indicates that “writing” is not automatically negative. The written word may be fixing, but writing itself is processual and can open up possibilities, providing inclusion rather than exclusion. For example, Maggie Wilder’s writing allows her to formulate an escape-plan that will enable her to free herself from her controlling husband. Constantly left behind in Greek hotel rooms while he carries out his research on icons, “she began to write a story. And then another. And then the stories began to tell her what to do with her own precious life” (220).

By describing the act of writing, Kroetsch’s narrative privileges the idea of writing as process. A straightforward description of the room where Maggie writes is altered by the revelation that she is in the act of writing this description, and that it is subject to change: “And yet for all the colour in the rugs and the garish print in strange alphabets on boxes and bales, the room was impossibly dark, foreboding –”; “Foreboding, nonsense. Maggie typed x’s across the word. Stop inventing, she typed” (38). Lynette Hunter draws attention to Maggie’s acts of writing within the text: “She writes down notes, makes lists, types as she thinks; and in this process of the action of writing she sometimes says the things she wants to say and sometimes doesn’t [...] What we watch here is a writing about articulacy and how much resists being said or simply elides under or into something else” (205). However, while it is true that Kroetsch evokes the idea of writing as an action or process that can avoid closure, he nonetheless suggests that Maggie uses writing to take control, and to create order. Following the shock that she receives when she discovers that Papa B has built a puppet theatre in the attic of her house, Maggie writes her way back into self-control: “Just the facts, please, she typed. I’m okay. She was at the kitchen table. This very

evening I'm going out for dinner, hurray, I'm going out for dinner, I'm getting out of this house, hurray, hurray" (106). By focusing on "the facts" in her writing, Maggie aims to master her contradictory feelings about Papa B.

Kroetsch offers another strategy for redressing the visual bias of the written word. In *The Puppeteer*, he suggests that writing can offer a means of achieving sensory interplay, by enabling participation and collaboration. Early in the novel, Kroetsch indicates that the text of *The Puppeteer* is a "collaborative" effort, authored by both Maggie Wilder and Jack Deemer (17). As a collaboration, the process of authoring the text relies upon the integration of the visual and the audile senses as the co-authors construct their narrative by talking to each other: "Maggie Wilder is writing this. Reading over her left shoulder, I become a loving supporter, the champion of her need to get the story of her wedding dress down on paper. Now and then I say a few words, joining myself into her train of thoughts. Sometimes, perhaps just to tease me, she scrambles a few of my words in amongst her own" (17).¹¹

The idea of writing as an art form that can be changeable and processual is paralleled by the existence of a puppet show that is associated with these highly valued qualities. The medium of the puppet show is associated with flexibility and participation, in contrast to the fixedness attributed to photography and certain kinds of writing. Papa B constructs a shadow puppet theatre in the attic of Maggie's house, which he uses to tell his version of the events of *Alibi*. He has spent time in Greece learning the art of shadow puppetry: "It was the Greeks, under the tyranny of the Turks – the Greeks figured out how to let the puppets say what couldn't be said"

¹¹ At the end of the novel, Deemer reiterates that the text of *The Puppeteer* is a collaboration between himself and Maggie Wilder, and that has been authored via a combination of the oral and visual senses: "I offer my recollections of events when she seems stuck for words. My failing eyesight remains a bit of a problem. Sometimes I ask her to read back to me what we have written" (264).

(106). The puppet shows that took place in Greece under Turkish control were used as a form of resistance, with subversive levels of meaning lying beneath the overt story of the performance. In *The Puppeteer*, puppet theatre is shown to be a fluid medium, which is capable of evoking multiple meaning, evolving in a way that challenges the fixity of the written word and the photographic image. Maggie's remark to Papa B about her husband Henry's preference for icons over puppet shows is significant: "Henry wouldn't so much as stick his head into a puppeteer's tent. He likes his pictures to stand still" (106). In contrast with static images, the puppet show is fluid, fluent and changeable.

Furthermore, the puppet show is not an exclusively visual medium. As Maggie discovers, it enables the audile-tactile to mingle with the visual in sensory interplay. Maggie engages with Papa B's puppet show by lending her voice to the puppets, improvising along with his storylines. She is "shocked and excited too" when he first includes her in the performance, but comes to enjoy the experience: "She had become part of the play. She liked that" (117). Maggie and Papa B interact through the screen on which the shadow puppets are projected: "she pressed her hand to the screen. She went on pressing her hand against the hand that responded and she knew she had entered into the house on the screen, she was inside and somewhere on the first floor, then on the second, finding the flight of purple stairs that would take her to the attic" (118). This tactile experience culminates in a sexual encounter that bypasses the visual in a sensory immersion in sound, touch, taste, and smell (126-7).

In *The Puppeteer* Kroetsch suggests that the fluid and changeable medium of the puppet show can provide an alternative to the fixity of the written word, or "the assurance of print" (147). This becomes particularly apparent when Papa B uses his puppets to reconstruct the events that occurred in *Alibi*. At one point, he has his

puppets enact the circumstances of Julie Magnuson's death. Ida and Josie interrupt the performance before the puppeteer can depict Julie's car plunging from a cliff (155-56). Soon after, Maggie receives a phone call from Ida, reporting that she has seen Manny De Medeiros alive in Rome: "That guy with the yellow hair. He *does* have yellow hair. Just like the puppet. And blue eyes that would knock your wig off" (160). Maggie feels that Papa B has brought this bizarre episode about, telling Ida "he's done this," as if Manny has been called back into life by Papa B's puppetry (161). The finality of Dorf's journal from *Alibi* is transformed into Papa B's open and changing puppet show. Within *The Puppeteer*, puppet theatre offers fluidity and the opportunity of another telling that offers a counter-perspective to the fixity of the written word. Maggie is attracted to the absence of closure, imagining her husband Henry as a shadow puppet: "She wanted to make up a story, try it, act it out, make changes if the ending didn't suit her (220).

Puppet theatre is also significant as a form of folk art. Matt Matsuda has explored the revival of the "folk" art form of shadow puppet theatre in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, commenting that it was an antimodern art form appealing to a populace experiencing the uncertainty wrought by modernization: "Puppetry was antimodern in that it was traditional [...] seeming to draw its inspiration from folkloric lineages and simple, honest lives and sentiments" (196). In having Dorf/Papa B practice this "folk art," Kroetsch bestows upon him the antimodernist qualities associated with the nineteenth century revival. As Matsuda remarks, "shadow theatre trades on an association to artisanal traditions, on the creation of hand-workers transmuted into the realm of beauty, and on a vocabulary of sublime simplicity" (194). When Maggie Wilder contemplates Papa B's "infernal damned clever hands that made him a puppeteer, a craftsman, a shaper, a lover, a collector's agent," it is

notable that the last of these terms seems particularly out of place, emphasizing the disconnection between his previous modern life as Deemer's jet-setting employee and his current incarnation as a monastic hand-worker (190). Furthermore, Dorf has learned the art of puppetry from "two old monks" who "preferred shadow puppets to saints" (104); monks are of course one of the groups of people idealized for their audile-tactile existence in McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* (92).¹² By the end of the novel, Maggie comes to think of him as "a monk after all" (242), and upon seeing him enter an Orthodox chapel Deemer announces that Dorf has become "the monk he had so long pretended to be" (250). In his combined role as craftsman and monastic holy man, Dorf comes to embody two of the central ideals of antimodernism.

Besides the puppet theatre of Papa B, the embroidered wedding dress that features in the text is another example of folk art. The dressmaker Julie Pavich, a friend of Papa B's aunt Ida, crafted the dress first worn by Deemer's wife Julie Magnuson, then by Maggie Wilder. As Lora Senechal Carney and Ian McKay have explored, the valorization of women's handicrafts such as weaving and rug-making as folk art was a prominent element of antimodern discourse associated with Canadian cultural nationalism in the period between the world wars. Prominent figures in the Canadian art world, including the Montreal painter and critic John Lyman and the Group of Seven member Arthur Lismer, championed rugs made by rural Québécois women as works created by natural, instinctive artists (Carney 109). The discourse praising the craftswoman as "natural" artists was the construction of a cultural elite whose antimodernist sentiments decried modernized production methods. Kroetsch's dressmaker character Josie Pavich is described in terms that emphasize that she is an

¹² As Lears discusses, an idealization of monastic life was also one of the various expressions of antimodern thought in late nineteenth century America, leading to the formation of such orders as the Society of St. John the Evangelist and the Order of the Holy Cross. Lears suggests that, to some antimodernists, "monasticism as a disciplined, ascetic way of life offered an eloquent witness against the emerging culture of comfort and convenience" (200-1).

unschooled and instinctive artist, as she is portrayed as being “ignorant” of the significance of the stories she depicts on her creations (251). Like the craftswomen praised in the early twentieth century, Josie’s merit as an artist is connected with her naivety. From Lismer and Lyman through to Kroetsch, the woman as artist is essentialized as an intuitive “primitive,” an association which echoes the romantic perception of women as “integral and whole in a fragmented and visual flatland” described by McLuhan (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 212).

Like Papa B’s puppet theatre, Maggie’s wedding dress functions as a fluid and mutable way of telling stories. The dress operates on a visual level as it is covered with intricate embroidery and beadwork, but Kroetsch establishes a strong connection between the dress and the “audile-tactile” senses which, as my analysis of his fiction shows, are particularly privileged in connection with his project of creating organic unity. Maggie discovers that “when she put on her old wedding dress she could *hear* the story she intended to tell” (2, emphasis added). Maggie learns that Josie Pavich made the dress for the intended wedding of Julie Magnuson and Fish, but that it was worn instead at Julie’s wedding to Deemer. The dress enables the coming together of the visual and audile senses, as is evident in the connections made in this description: “The nimble fingers of Josie Pavich had *scribbled* on that cloth *each tattle of gossip that came to her ignorant ears*” (251, emphasis added).

Generally, Kroetsch portrays “visual” media such as the written word and the photograph in negative terms, suggesting that these are examples of technologies which fix and, in doing so, fragment. In order to create a visual “text” that does not become “fixing,” Kroetsch yokes concepts of women’s handicrafts as authentic and primitive folk art together with ideas from South American magic realist fiction. In conversation with Lee Spinks, Kroetsch suggests that *The Puppeteer* has “got

elements of Magic Realism, especially since what's on the wedding dress keeps changing" (16). The dress itself becomes a fantastic narrative, a fanciful combination of elements that vary at every viewing. For example, when it is being made, Fish asks Josie to include one small detail in the dress: "Josie embroidered all the soft colours of the dress into the scales of a rainbow trout, the trout in a mountain stream, the stream and its flowered banks under a hint of mountains, the wide range of mountains under a raft of cumulus clouds, windows afloat among the clouds" (58). Later in the text Jack Deemer indicates that the pictures on the dress tell the tale of how he cheated Fish of his bride even as the event occurred: "Seen close up, it was a veritable mirage of colours and forms, a story of desire, of betrayal, of ragged lust, of barbarous fulfilment" (251); "In the tumult of the dress we were the story that Josie Pavich had only guessed; we were the lovers in animal form she had so carefully pictured, the man with the body of a fish, the horse-headed man, the woman with octopus arms" (136-137).

It is significant that the characters who desire to control and to impose order on those around them are most in awe of the power of this piece of magical folk art. Jack Deemer, the controlling presence in the text, returns the dress to its maker immediately after the consummation of his marriage to Julie Magnuson (31). For Maggie's husband Henry Ketch, the dress is a "gawdy and awful" reminder of one of the few times he failed to impose his will on his wife, as although he had wished her to marry him in "a straight street-style suit," Maggie had insisted on wearing the dress that he loathes: "Pictures, for God's sake, on a wedding dress. Two-headed magpies. Sky-blue mountain goats. A pickaxe. A rainstorm. Half the main street of some town that's dead and gone" (224). Henry desires to control Maggie, keeping her enclosed within the confines of their marriage, and literally in "small rooms in cheap hotels"

(26). His surname “Ketch,” a near homonym for “catch,” emphasizes his desire to fix Maggie in one still image and way of life.¹³ Obsessed with stasis, Henry wants clothes to be no more than garments, while Maggie realizes that clothes can be costumes or even stories, and as such can open up possibilities rather than closing them down. As if to emphasize this point, the dress itself is incomplete. Soon after meeting Papa B, Maggie sees details on the dress that she has never noticed before:

She was [...] absentmindedly staring at the almost invisible colours in the skirt of her wedding dress when she noticed for the first time, in the intricate embroidery and beadwork on her lap, the outline in miniature of the dress she was wearing. The dressmaker who had filled the dress with detail had, with the same care, left blank an outline of the dress no larger than a postage stamp.

(4)

This image indicates that the story is not closed, and that more can be added to both the dress and the narrative

A secondary definition of “to embroider” is to embellish a narrative with exaggerated or invented details. The dressmaker Josie Pavich combines both the meanings of the term in her creations. The fluid pictures on the wedding dress stand in opposition to the static image-making espoused by the photographer Karen Strike, and, by extension, the “Gutenberg” conventions of print narratives. For Kroetsch, the elaborate inventiveness and fluidity of Josie’s embroidery contrasts with the idea of written and photographic documents, which he feels are “grotesque in [their] ellipses and brevity, or even in their kind of summary” (*Labyrinths* 187). Noting that different embroidered details appear on the dress for different people, Hunter points out that “Like the written words to the reader, the dress becomes a text appropriate to each

¹³ The name “Ketch” also has meaning in the context of puppeteering. The character of the hangman in the Punch and Judy puppet show is known as Jack Ketch, after a notorious English executioner who died in 1686.

character whether it be Josie, Maggie, Fish, Papa B, Julie Magnuson or Deemer himself” (203). Richard Lane on the other hand suggests that, rather than offering each character a chance to author their own particular narrative, the dress itself *becomes* the overall narrative as written by Maggie: “her story and her dress end up enfolding everything and everybody, including Jack Deemer” (40). While both these critics offer different readings of the dress – Hunter seeing it as representing narrative multiplicity, Lane as textual totalization – they each highlight the way that it functions as a metaphor for the novel. I agree that the wedding dress functions as a synecdoche for the book itself, but argue that this is because Kroetsch wishes to bestow upon his narrative the “authenticity” of folk art. By creating the image of the hand-crafted wedding dress as a magical, audile-tactile work of art, Kroetsch invites parallels between Josie Pavich’s creation and his own. A dress can be embroidered, and so can a story.

Besides the wedding dress, Greek icons exist within the novel as “visual” texts. In their perception of these icons, the various characters of the novel reveal their own sensory biases. Jack Deemer is attracted to the stillness of iconic images on a purely visual level: “There is something static about icons that appeals to me” (198-199). He also describes the photograph that fuels his sexual obsession with Maggie as “iconic,” indicating his wish to fix her down (113). In marked contrast, Maggie experiences complete sensory immersion when she views icons in the context of Greek chapels, with their “small *forests* of candles” – itself an organic image (144, emphasis added):

Maggie closed the door and was surrounded. Her turning to look at the surrounding walls made the flames on the little forest of candles flicker and leap. She was enclosed, immersed; the icons flared gold; the gold flared into

the stillness of brown, into the thrust of red. The colours took form; colours turned into cloaks and cowls; clothed bodies erupted into the nakedness of face. (226)

Far from static, the icons appear to be capable of moving and making sounds: “she saw among the faces a face that whispered her a message. Or, turning, and turning again, she did not see but rather realized she had seen a face among those sainted faces; she had seen one different face, behind the filigree of silver, behind a clouded glass. She knew the lips of the face had moved” (226). For McLuhan the icon is a cool medium, an “inclusive form” (*Understanding Media* 12), but Maggie’s response to icons is also reminiscent of McLuhan’s discussion of the participatory sensory immersion achievable through viewing cave art by candlelight (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 66).¹⁴ Maggie realizes that the importance of icons lies in the cultural milieu that allows them to create this sense of all-encompassing sensory immersion. In contrast, her husband Henry sees icons as portable commodities, and arranges the theft of the icons which are the focus of his academic research, saying “I’m sick of looking at bad colour slides and trying to remember what I saw in a badly lit chapel” (217). Like Henry Ketch, both Jack Deemer and Karen Strike wish to remove the icons from Greece (211-2). Deemer describes icons as “Tempera on great, thick slabs of wood,” but highlights that they are movable and collectible in spite of their weight when he remarks that a famous icon of *The Raising of Lazarus* which “was once part of an altar screen” in a chapel, is now “part of a private collection” (199). Maggie realizes

¹⁴ McLuhan provides a substantial quotation from Siegfried Giedion’s comments on cave paintings in *The Beginnings of Art*: “Nothing is more destructive of the true values of primeval art that the glare of electric light in this realm of eternal night. Flares or small stone lamps burning animal fat, of which examples have been found, permit one to obtain only fragmentary glimpses of the colors and lines of the objects depicted. In such a soft, flickering light these take on an almost magical movement. The engraved lines, and even the colored surfaces, lose their intensity under a strong light and sometimes disappear altogether” (Giedion quoted in *Gutenberg Galaxy* 65-6).

that, should Deemer's plan succeed, the icons will be reduced to merely visual artefacts, and even photographs, as "Karen Strike will return with her cameras and attempt to record what she helped make disappear" (244). Kroetsch links Henry Ketch, Jack Deemer, and Karen Strike as they are mutually responsible for the theft of Greek cultural artefacts that will be confined to the walls of Henry's study, the interior of Deemer's warehouses, or Karen's photographs, instead of remaining part of a living Greek Orthodox culture that signifies the continuation of an idealized pre-modern realm into the present day. In contrast with Deemer, Papa B understands that the icons belong in a particular environment, telling Maggie that "Icons never leave Mount Athos. The mountain itself will leave Mount Athos before any icons leave Mount Athos" (193). Papa B becomes a heroic figure as he prevents the removal of the icons from the island. Although he dies in the process, he "is seen as something of a saint by the monks and priests of Mount Athos," who express their desire to build a chapel in his honour (264). Once epitomizing the modernized, fragmented "Gutenberg man", Dorf has become 'integral' under influence of the idealized medieval realm of monasticism.

Since becoming Papa B, Dorf is primarily associated with orality, the mode of expression of integral beings throughout Kroetsch's fictional oeuvre. He is therefore particularly dangerous to the controlling Jack Deemer, as he knows his secrets. Papa B tells Maggie that Deemer wants to keep him quiet (29), and his friend Thomas Bludgett informs her that "There are people around who want lovingly to tear out [Dorf's] tongue" (165). In his final confrontation with Deemer, Dorf accuses him of wanting "to put words themselves under lock and key," while Deemer mocks "his unstoppable tongue" (253). Ultimately, only death can put an end to Dorf's speech.

When he falls from a cliff to his death, it is significant that he lands on his head, forcing “his tongue out of his mouth” (257).

Kroetsch also signals his horror of mechanical weapons through the death of Dorf, the novel’s most sympathetic and ‘integral’ character. At the climax, Manny shoots Dorf in an inversion of the ending of *Alibi*, practically severing his foot from his body and causing him to fall off the cliff to his death: “It was as if Dorf’s left foot exploded off his leg and in the process gave the shattering sound that was in reality the sound from the rifle being fired” (257). The graphic imagery depicting Dorf’s injury emphasizes the destructive impact of the technology of the rifle upon bodily and sensory unity. As in his previous novels, it is clear that Kroetsch continues his project of denouncing modern technology in *The Puppeteer*. Not only guns, but also motorized vehicles are seen as potentially deadly weapons. Besides reminders of Julie Magnuson’s car accident from *Alibi* (42), Kroetsch offers other examples of the danger of automobiles. Maggie loses control of her car on black ice (50), and swerves to avoid a jack-knifed truck (52). In Rome, she narrowly escapes being mown down by a limousine (171).¹⁵ Other motorized vehicles are represented as being as dangerous, as Karen’s powerful motorboat almost sinks the dinghy that Maggie is travelling in at Deadman Spring (77). Even movie cameras are seen as destructive, as they are denounced for destroying traditional Greek shadow-puppetry (123).

While Kroetsch’s critique of modern technology follows the pattern established in his previous texts, he initially appears to be reconciled with urban modernity. In contrast with novels such as *But We Are Exiles*, *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*, Kroetsch provides positive imagery relating to the urban environment in *The Puppeteer*. Maggie Wilder sees the attractive qualities of Vancouver, realizing

¹⁵ Cars are also linked to a controlling mentality. When Thomas Bludgett offers Maggie the loan of his car, she feels that he is “closing off her alternatives, shutting her down” (41).

that “the city was beautiful, in the shine of rain” (24). Even traffic signs are imbued with a kind of loveliness. As Maggie drives through the city, her car “The car stop[s] at a beautiful, shining stop sign, then flow[s] like water itself into a new and anonymous and engulfing stream of traffic” (24). However, it is clear from this example that Kroetsch uses organic, natural images to describe the city in positive terms. Kroetsch even creates parallels between the urban environment and the natural world in his description of Maggie’s experience of window-shopping, again by making use of organic imagery: “Elegant sofas, dressed in flowers and silver thread, *bellied* against the plate-glass windows. Doorways split like *ripe fruit* to spill the promise of secret and gorgeous lives. Rain fell onto the city *like an infinitely large flock of infinitely small birds*” (25, emphasis added). Later, as Maggie drives through the city with Dorf’s friend Thomas Bludgett, the city is described as being like a whale: “they drove in the wet, glowing night of the whale’s sleeping. Somewhere the heart of the beautiful beast rested, and they drove in the long streets that glowed electric with the soft, erotic throb of sleep” (43).¹⁶ Therefore, it is not that Kroetsch demonstrates a turn towards praising the modernity exemplified by the technologies of the city in *The Puppeteer*, but rather that the city can be seen as positive only when viewed as a natural, organic entity, like the body of a whale. Given the importance of organic imagery it is not surprising that Maggie discovers that she prefers the pastoral idyll of a Greek village to the streets of Vancouver: “Damn, she told herself. Just my luck. I like it. Sunshine and bougainvilleas. The pleasant, rich smell of donkey manure in the loud streets instead of rain and solitude. The elbowing rub of people busy with being daily and alive” (218). Once again, Kroetsch indicates that the

¹⁶ The reference to being inside a whale also evokes the intertext of *Pinocchio*. This text is later evoked overtly, as we are told that during their stay in Italy Manny and Julie lived in a villa that “had something to do with Carlo Lorenzini and his creation of Pinocchio” (206).

sensory harmony of sight, sound, smell and touch is only achievable through the rejection of metropolitan life, and the adoption of a rural existence.

In terms of unity and wholeness there is an important image in the text. In the gardens of the Villa d'Este there is a statue of a many-breasted woman: "The breasts were full, large-nippled, abundant, giving down a rain of water into a pool" (182). This is a representation of the Roman goddess Diana, known as Artemis in Greek mythology. The Diana-Artemis figure serves as an embodiment of the resolution of binary oppositions into unity: as the goddess of both fertility and the hunt (called "Butcher" by the Spartans [183]), the figure of this deity operates as a personification of life and death, represented by a female form. Significantly, at the end of the novel Jack Deemer adopts a female guise, signalling his achievement of a sense of organic wholeness, and the resolution of the binary opposition of male and female into a single entity. He wears what had once been Maggie's wedding dress as she accompanies him on strolls through the streets of the village of Artemona, named after Artemis, on the Greek island of Siphnos (265). The final pages of the novel indicate that this is an idyllic existence for Deemer, as he and Maggie partake in the sensory pleasures of village life: "We map our pleasant lives with visits. We have become objects of curiosity and praise on the island. Sometimes old men motion us to sit down to a glass of wine and a dish of olives. Old women cross themselves, then grope to talk in the language of gesture and smile and mime, inviting us to relax, to have a cup of Greek coffee, a plate of bread and calamari and feta" (266). In this list of activities, several of Kroetsch's preoccupations are present: the idea of the "visit," which he has associated with the prairie oral culture,¹⁷ and the sensual combination of

¹⁷ In "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues" Kroetsch writes that "the visit is the great prairie cultural event. People go visiting, or they go to other events in order to visit" (6). He associates the concept of the "visit" with the rural culture of orality, saying that during visits "we talk ourselves into existence" (6).

smell, touch and taste as realized in the consumption of food and drink. Jack Deemer achieves sensory balance by disassociating himself from his previous metropolitan life in Calgary, and his “macho” occupation as an oil baron. Of course, he is also wearing a wedding dress. He remarks that the dress has only needed slight alteration, as “My dugs fill it out more than adequately, especially at those recurring times when I have a tendency to retain water” (265). By having Deemer acquire a female appearance, Kroetsch suggests that femininity is a gateway to sensory unity. Furthermore, the wedding dress signifies heterosexuality, as Lynette Hunter has remarked (202).

Hunter has also commented that, at the end of the novel, Maggie is removed from the “domestic group” or “women’s community” that she had established through contact with the dressmaker Josie Pavich, Papa B’s aunt Ida, and his former lovers Julie Magnuson and Inez Catonio (214). While she expresses that she finds this occurrence “troubling” (214) Hunter does not see the parallels with *What the Crow Said*, in which the members of the seemingly self-contained women’s community of the Lang household ultimately reveal their need for men. The conclusions of both *What the Crow Said* and *Alibi* indicate that, for Kroetsch, communities consisting entirely of women must be disrupted because they are incomplete. To realize Kroetsch’s vision of wholeness, the sexes must come together. The final image of Deemer in the wedding dress parallels the image of “the naked circle of everything” that concludes *What the Crow Said*, except that while that novel’s ending depends on the physical presence of a woman to create this image of organic unity, in *The Puppeteer* Deemer takes over the role of the woman himself. The image of Jack Deemer in a wedding dress is, effectively, a vision of “the clothed circle of everything.” Ultimately, Kroetsch’s novel not only finishes with a sense of closure,

but it also absorbs women into the singular figure of the male cross-dresser. The narrative strands of the novel are finally woven into the “single story” which Kroetsch claims to fear (Spinks, “Puppets” 15).

Throughout the paired texts of *Alibi* and *The Puppeteer*, Kroetsch continues to evoke the desire for completeness that is associated with his antimodern perception of a fragmented world in which modernization is dominant. In the figures of Dorf and Deemer, Kroetsch constructs two “Gutenberg men” who eventually achieve sensory integration. Dorf acquires a sense of organic wholeness through his reinvention as the Greek Orthodox monk Papa B. In portraying monasticism as Dorf’s means of achieving harmony, Kroetsch contributes to a long tradition in which monastic life is represented as a source of spiritual and sensory authenticity in a modernizing world. Lears has traced this trope back to the nineteenth century, and it continues to resonate in contemporary Western culture in the representations of cloistered life documented by the 2005 BBC reality television series *The Monastery*¹⁸ and Philip Gröning’s documentary *Into Great Silence*, which was first released in 2005, charting six months in the lives of members of the Carthusian Order.¹⁹ While Jack Deemer’s adoption of a hermaphroditic identity at the end of *The Puppeteer* might at first glance appear to be very different from Dorf’s transformation into a monk, both characters represent different means of achieving the same end: a sense of unity in a fragmenting modern world.

¹⁸ This was followed in 2006 by its sequel, *The Convent*. Also in 2006, the US network TLC broadcast an American version of *The Monastery*.

¹⁹ The connection between antimodern sentiment and the idealization of monastic life is highlighted by Catherine Wheatley in her review of Gröning’s film. Wheatley also draws attention to the commodification of images of monasticism as a twenty-first century “quick fix” for the stresses of contemporary life, writing that “In many ways *Into Great Silence* serves as a necessary antidote to the increasing dominance of the media in modern-day living – though there’s a certain irony to be found in comparing the quick fix it offers its audience with the lifelong dedication of its subjects” (62).

Chapter 7: *The Man from the Creeks*

Throughout his most recent novel, *The Man from the Creeks* (1998), Kroetsch engages with the ideas about the destructive impact of modernity and the resulting danger of sensory imbalance, expressing the desirability of achieving sensory wholeness through contact with nature and the earth itself. This text therefore demonstrates the continuation of Kroetsch's preoccupation with the necessity of the renunciation of modernity in the pursuit of an organically "whole" engagement with the world, a crucial element of his fiction since the early unpublished work *When Sick for Home*. In *The Man from the Creeks* Kroetsch once again foregrounds the importance of complete sensory involvement, and indicates the potentially fatal outcome of allowing an audile-tactile culture that privileges touching, talking and listening to be overpowered by the visual sense.

The novel is based on Robert Service's famous poem "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," which describes a gunfight in a Dawson saloon during the Klondike gold rush. Service's poem begins on the night of the shooting:

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon;

The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag-time tune;

Back at the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,

And watching his luck was his light-o'-love, the lady that's known as Lou.

A "miner fresh from the creeks" enters the saloon and takes over at the piano, where he masterfully conjures up through music the story of his betrayal in love by Lou and Dangerous Dan. A shoot-out results, killing both men. The stranger, "the man from the creeks," dies "clutched to the breast of the lady that's known as Lou." The poem concludes with the revelation that Lou not only kissed him but "pinched his poke" of

gold dust. With a plot providing mystery, betrayal, and revenge in a romantic frontier setting – the myth of the frontier itself exemplifying the antimodern ideal of the quest for authentic experience – “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” proved to be one of Service’s most popular verses. By 1940 over three million copies of *Songs of a Sourdough*, the collection in which it first appeared, had been sold (Barkley).

Kroetsch’s novel takes the poem as its inspiration, but delves into the histories of the characters of the poem. Back-stories are provided for some of those present at the shooting of Dan McGrew, including the characters “the man from the creeks” and “The kid that handles the music box” who remain unnamed in Service’s verse. The musician is Peek, the novel’s narrator, and his mother is “Lou,” although this name is itself a pseudonym. “The man from the creeks” is Ben Redd, their travelling companion on the long journey from Seattle to Dawson City. As the novel opens, Lou and Peek’s existence as stowaways is discovered on the riverboat *Delta Queen*, which is bringing prospectors from Seattle to the Alaska port of Skagway. On the verge of being thrown overboard, the mother and son are spared when the stranger Ben Redd bribes the captain and irate passengers with two kegs of whiskey, enabling him to be put ashore with the stowaways. The three become partners. Ben is a cooper from Iowa who is smuggling whiskey (disguised as barrels of salt herring) to the Klondike to sell so he can invest in a goldmine with Dan McGrew. After being stranded in the wilderness, Ben, Peek and Lou bargain whiskey with Tlingit Indians to be taken to Skagway. They continue by horse to Sheep Camp, then by foot over the infamous Chilkoot Pass, completing their journey with a boat journey down the Yukon River to Dawson City. In Dawson they finally encounter Dan McGrew, and Peek narrates his alternative version of the events described in Service’s poem.

Kroetsch expresses his attraction to the poems of Service in an autobiographical essay, “Why I Went Up North and What I Found When He [sic] Got There,” published in 1995, three years before *The Man from the Creeks*. He writes in this piece, “I still imagine I might one day write a novel about [...] the men or women who, in the poems of Robert Service, ‘moiled’ for gold – there beneath the northern lights or the midnight sun” (14). *The Man from the Creeks* is his realization of this ambition. As a popular writer, Service brought his frontier legends to a wide audience both in Canada and around the world. In the early twentieth century, he was the most successful writer to use the Canadian North as subject matter.¹ In an interview with J. Kingston Pierce, Kroetsch highlights his long-standing interest in Service’s work, remarking “I read the poem [“The Shooting of Dan McGrew”] when I was a kid on the prairies of Canada, a young boy fascinated by the North even then,” and arguing, “Service’s remarkable international reputation has to be taken seriously. He tells us something about the function and appeal of poetry. I especially like his going back to the ballad – storytelling, up-front characters.”² Troubled by modernization, Kroetsch valorizes the “authenticity” of folk art forms such as puppet theatre and handicrafts in *The Puppeteer*. Significantly, ballads are another form of “folk art” that have been mythologized within the tradition of antimodern culture. McLuhan points out that the Romantic poets “had very consciously gone to the old ballads and to popular folklore in a search for new effects and new experiences which would release the human spirit from the chains of conventional perception” (*Counterblast* 110).

¹ In fact, Service spent little of his life in the Klondike, and didn’t arrive at Dawson until 1908, a year after he had published *Songs of a Sourdough*, the verse collection containing “The Shooting of Dan McGrew.”

² Several of Kroetsch’s contemporaries have commented on the significance of Service in the literary history of Canada. George Bowering states that until his twenties he had never heard of any Canadian writers “except maybe Robert Service” (“Writer Writing” 21). Dorothy Livesay suggests that popular writers such as Service play an important role in the development of national literature, remarking “I don’t think a mature novel can arise in a country unless there’s been a lot of popular writing as a base,” and asking “What’s wrong with the ballads of Robert Service? It’s a genre. It’s great fun” (Twigg 137).

Service occupies an ambivalent position in relation to writing and orality. As a balladeer he is associated with Kroetsch's privileged concepts of storytelling and the oral tradition. Service therefore becomes a role model for Kroetsch, exemplifying the necessity of writing works that maintain a connection with oral culture. However, as a writer, Service participates in the print culture, and his ballads therefore become fixed as written documents. Kroetsch explains his desire to retell Service's poem: "We use stories to give shape to our experiences. Service did it so well that it's difficult to get past him. By having my narrator spring forth from the poem, I got loose. A character created by Service talking back to Service, correcting him, so to speak" (Pierce). Peek's story is the "talking back," the oral "correction" to Service's poem offered by Kroetsch. Discussing his own text, then, Kroetsch suggests that the novel is a necessary supplement to Service's work, "correcting" the limited perspective presented as the sole version in the original. Once again, Kroetsch privileges the idea of loosening or opening, expressing his aim to turn Service's constricted poem into an inclusive text, enabling one fragment of the "Gutenberg Galaxy" to become part of the unified, organic text *The Man from the Creeks*.

Peek narrates the novel, having survived to the age of one hundred and fourteen. His intention in writing down the tale is to reveal what really happened on the night of the gunfight in the Malamute Saloon, providing the "facts" behind Service's account. This event is described in the final section of the novel, which begins with an epigraph from Service's poem: "When out of the night, which was fifty below, and into the din and the glare, / There stumbled a miner fresh from the creeks, dog-dirty and loaded for bear." Peek prides himself on the accuracy of his details as opposed to those of Service:

“A miner fresh from the creeks,” the poet says. He wasn’t there at the time and didn’t show up in the Yukon as a bank clerk for another six years. No, indeed, the poet wasn’t there. He, not the miner, was the stranger of whom he goes on to speak. Why are poets such bluffers and prevaricators, such dotards in the face of the bald truth? Why do poets fail, ever, to look at the facts themselves?
(278)

It is his desire to present the “facts” that encourages Peek to write his own version of events. In Peek’s account of the gunfight at the Malamute Saloon, Ben Redd (“the man from the creeks”) kills Dan McGrew, but Dan slays Lou and Ben with a single bullet. In narrating the death of Lou, Peek “corrects” Service’s poem, in which she not only survives gunfight, but also steals the miner’s gold.³ In doing so, he endeavours to save his mother’s reputation from the balladeer’s slander.

Peek begins to write his account of the gold rush upon his arrival in Dawson, jotting down details in order to create an accurate portrayal of the times in the face of the inaccuracies of the local press (a concern which echoes Kroetsch’s treatment of the newspaper editor Liebhaber in *What the Crow Said*):

There were two newspapers here in Dawson, both of them one-man shows, each of them stealing stories from the other and improving on them in the process. Sometimes when I read stories in the *Dawson City News* or *The Klondike Nugget* I said to myself, somebody ought to be setting the record

³ Throughout the text, Peek emphasizes his desire to correct Service. He questions the accuracy of Service’s ballad by indicating that he got the temperature wrong (“The poet was only off by four degrees [...] there on the first Saturday in February the temperature dropped to fifty-four degrees below zero Fahrenheit” [277]), and suggests that the poet has presented an inaccurate description of the arrival of the “man from the creeks” at McGrew’s saloon (“I wouldn’t say that someone or anything stumbled into the Malamute Saloon. And no one else could say that either. A cloud of fog formed around whatever it was that came in through the door. The cold air from outside hit the warm, damp air inside and, just like that, no question, ice fog was all you could possibly see” [278]).

straight. That's why I started making notes to myself. Even back then, I wasn't afraid to face the facts. (248)

In his determination to be accurate in his representation of history on paper, Peek might appear to be beholden to what McLuhan suggests are the linear methods of print technology, the idea that print is “visual, sequential, uniform and lineal” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 175). However, as Kroetsch indicates in an interview with Simona Bertacco, Peek “*thinks* he’s telling you the truth” (236, emphasis added). The narrative that Kroetsch presents as Peek’s account of the gold rush is not the seemingly objective, fragmented and sequentially-ordered prose of a “Gutenberg Man.” Peek’s narrative is subjective and digressive. He interrupts his memories with insights into his present-day existence as a remarkably old man still residing in the Klondike. Recalling an occasion when he suffered from a case of diarrhoea in a mountain pass as a teenager, Peek compares his predicament then with his current constipation: “You’d think the wonders of modern science could unplug an asshole. But no. The same miracle science that couldn’t bung me up back there in Sheep Camp now can’t figure out how to liquefy shit” (217).

Peek’s meandering ruminations signal his participation in the oral tradition of storytelling. In the closing pages of the novel, Kroetsch emphatically links Peek with oral culture, as his narrator responds to present-day tourists in the Malamute Saloon by retelling Service’s legends. He reveals that as he is playing the bar-room piano, “before I hit the keys, I tell them the fib they’re dying to hear. I tell them I play all my sad songs in memory of Dan McGrew. That’s what they came for. Then they feel they’re getting their money’s worth” (306). Far from offering “just the facts,” as Maggie Wilder puts it in *The Puppeteer*, Peek’s narrative is clearly signalled as being the account of one man, whose involvement in the events on the night of the gunfight

leaves him unable to give the objective account he longs to create. Peek becomes the vehicle for Kroetsch's assertion that "We use stories to give shape to our experiences" (Pierce). By becoming "story" rather than "fact," Peek's narrative comes to epitomize the wholeness of an audile-tactile oral culture.

While Kroetsch decries the gold rush for its destructive "modernization" of the wilderness (as will be explored later in this chapter), he celebrates the oral culture that results from the exchanges between the various prospectors. As they travel down the Yukon River, Peek relishes this rich oral culture: "We had visiting to do. I had to catch up on the river news. There was a lot of gossip, along the river. People stopped here and there to pan, hoping to strike it rich before they got to Dawson, and after they found nothing they told each other stories of finding traces of gold" (174). In having Peek extol the virtues of the "visit" as an occasion for orality, Kroetsch reiterates the thoughts on western Canadian oral culture articulated in his essay "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues" (6). In *The Man from the Creeks* Kroetsch also connects oral storytelling with an almost erotic, tactile focus on food and drink: "Those stampedeers told gold stories, and then they talked a lot about food. They told each other what they would buy to eat, after they struck it rich. Everything from venison washed down with champagne to creamed garden peas and pan-fried spring chicken" (174). One form of orality follows on from another, as "Talking [leads] to singing" (174). Kroetsch suggests that participation in this oral culture is necessary for surviving the harsh journey. Those who rely solely upon the printed word are put at a dangerous disadvantage. During their journey by boat down the Yukon River, Peek, Lou and Ben encounter a pair of fellow travellers, who are "printers by trade" (167). Archetypal "Gutenberg men," the faith invested by these printers in visual culture leads to disaster. Having studied the route in advance, they

believe “the next set of rapids [is] only a quarter of a mile long” (168). This inspires false confidence, as the distance is no measure of severity: one of the men is swept from the boat and drowns (168). Significantly, Ben Redd is aware that one cannot rely exclusively on vision, as this sense can be deceptive: “He had lived all his life by the Mississippi, and he knew about things like ice jams and submerged logs that you couldn’t see that could punch a hole clean through a hull” (162). As in Kroetsch’s previous novels, in *The Man from the Creeks* he highlights positive aspects of participating in an oral, audile-tactile culture while warning about the negative impact of the written word and the resulting visual bias.

The written word is not the only “visual” medium that is critiqued in the novel. Kroetsch uses descriptions of archive photographs to set the scene and to highlight the difference between a photograph, which operates solely by means of the visual sense, and the story that Peek tells in order to evoke his sensory involvement:

You’ve seen those famous photographs of Chilkoot Pass. Nothing but snow. Except for a line of stampedeers climbing from the bottom left corner of each photograph up toward the top right. A long thin line of humped figures, each small dark shape bending against the snow-covered mountain. Eric Hegg captured it all by being there and climbing with us. And by taking photographs which he later let us have at a considerable price. (114)

Like Soapy Smith, a notoriously crooked Skagway sheriff encountered by the travellers on their journey, Eric Hegg is a real-life figure whose photographs are an important archival resource for the history of the Klondike gold rush today. Peek reveals that he has one of Hegg’s prints (“Lou and Ben and I are in the line in the one I own. I keep it on the wall in the parlour, here in my cabin” [114]), but he emphasizes the ways in which the picture fails to capture the reality of his experience:

What the photo doesn't show you is how it felt when we thought we'd made it to the top of the world and deserved a reward. Ben and Lou and I looked out over The Summit, into the interior. We peeked out over the divide. We looked out toward the headwaters of the Yukon River. And all we saw was more rock and more snow and more glaciers – when the wind and the blowing snow allowed us to see anything at all. (114-15)⁴

As in *Alibi* and *The Puppeteer*, Kroetsch emphasizes the gulf between the photograph and the story being told about event that is depicted, highlighting his unease with the fixity of the printed image in contrast with the open possibilities of storytelling.

Through his use of Service's poem and Hegg's photographs, Kroetsch continues his engagement with questioning the written word and the photographic image. However, the account of the shooting at the Malamute, although expanded from Service's poem, only takes up a small portion of the novel. The main body of the text is a description of Lou, Ben and Peek's journey to Dawson City, an account of the Klondike gold rush. What is particularly significant about Kroetsch's account of this era is the way in which he uses it to critique modernity, and to emphasise the detrimental effects of this mass migration upon the Canadian environment. Kroetsch reveals his ambivalence about the impact of the gold rush. On the one hand, by forcing its participants to dig in the earth itself, mining for gold is an "integral" occupation that guarantees full sensory immersion in the task at hand. On the other hand, the mines destroy the natural landscape, and the "stampeder" who participate in the gold rush consume natural resources. Most alarmingly of all, in terms of Kroetsch's antimodernism, is the realization that the gold rush brings urban modernity to the wilderness.

⁴ A possible intertext for this passage is Margaret Atwood's poem "This Is a Photograph of Me," in which the speaker lies drowned in lake forming the distant backdrop of a landscape photograph (Ellman and O'Clair 1543)

As well as contributing to the creation of a divided, fragmented humanity, modernization is castigated for splitting humankind from an integral unity with the natural world. As in several of Kroetsch's previous novels, most notably *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*, the negative impact of modernity on the landscape and natural creatures of Canada is decried. Peek has an instinctive awareness of nature that allows him to coexist with its creatures. Having been marooned in the wilderness following the escape from the *Delta Queen*, Peek encounters a grizzly bear while searching for food. Kroetsch's description emphasizes Peek's sensory involvement in his encounter with the grizzly: "I smelled the bear before I saw it [...] I got hit by a smell that fell over my gold pan and my head like a hood" (28). Tellingly, the impact of the smell of the grizzly seems to blind Peek, freeing him from the over-reliance upon the visual sense that Kroetsch associates with modernity. Peek empathizes with the bear when he realizes it is frightened of him, saying "I knew how it felt" (32). When it leaps back into the river leaving a headless salmon behind, Peek takes the fish, but does so reverentially, indicating his desire to respect and honour the natural world: "I loaded the salmon into the pan. I didn't run this time. I said thank you to the young grizzly and gave a little bow and turned and marched away, not once glancing over my shoulder. I had to show the bear I trusted it" (32).

Peek's respect for nature is also foregrounded in his concern for the natural environment. Realizing that trees are being torn down to make lumber on an industrial scale, he laments the impact of the gold rush on the land: "I thought of the forest coming down, the bears being killed all around us in their dens" (131). Kroetsch portrays the encroaching modernity resulting from the gold rush as the destruction of humanity's organic union with nature. The devastating impact of the gold rush on horses – which, as *When Sick for Home* and *The Studhorse Man* indicate are totemic

animals for Kroetsch – is decried throughout the novel. The brutality of the treatment meted out to these animals emphatically signals Kroetsch’s revulsion with the impact of modernization on natural creatures:

Out on their steamer, in the falling snow, a bunch of men were driving a herd of horses over the side, whipping them and shouting, forcing them to leap in the water. Maybe twenty horses were swimming toward shore. More men, where the water got shallow, were trying to capture the frightened horses as they found their hooves under them and began to wade. The panicking horses ran right over our two guards. No one paid much attention. (56-7)

Later, Peek learns that when the *Delta Queen* docked in Skagway, “two of the horses hanged themselves, trying to jump off the boat” (64). He discovers that the White Pass into the Yukon is known as “the Dead Horse Trail” because of the thousands of horses that have died of exhaustion on its slopes: a packer called Lemon Ed tells the travellers that “he counted four hundred dead horses in the course of an hour’s travel” (68), and Peek himself estimates that he has passed the bodies of forty horses in the course of a short time on the trail (84). In both *When Sick for Home* and *The Studhorse Man* Kroetsch emphasizes the importance of the relationship between humanity and the natural world, which he sees as a harmonious organic unity which is destroyed when people use violence against horses. In *The Man from the Creeks*, the full horror that emerges from treating animals as if they are machines is evident from the number of dead horses on the White Pass Trail: “Lemon Ed said it was a crime, people who didn’t know one end of a horse from another using the poor dumb animals as pack animals on a trail that would make a mountain goat stumble and slide” (68).

Kroetsch indicates throughout the text that the advent of modernity has caused the loss of a natural state of organic unity between humanity and nature. This is particularly evident in Kroetsch's treatment of the boomtowns visited by Peek, Lou and Ben in the course of their journey. The gold rush has brought swift modernization to the wilderness. In the Alaska port of Skagway, where buildings are being extended as soon as they have been completed, the violent clash between humanity and nature is signalled in the images of "A man [...] whipping his horses with a bull whip and screaming and swearing" (62). Kroetsch's descriptive prose also highlights the ugliness of the various boomtowns and encampments. The streets of Skagway are "a mishmash and tangle of tents and shacks" (71). The "tent city" at Sheep Camp is described in terms that evoke the destructive potential of modernization, as Peek announces that the encampment "looked like a railroad accident without the railroad" (87); later, imagery relating to train crashes is used by Kroetsch to emphasize the horrors of modernity, as Ben reveals that his father had been "boiled alive" in a railway accident (214).⁵ Dawson City is described as being "a circus and a sideshow and a calamity all in one" (252), although the main dangers it offers are the perils of easy spending opportunities: "People wanted extravagant meals and they wanted to dance and they wanted to gamble. Champagne was forty dollars a bottle. One miner treated all his horses to a bottle each when he rode into town with his gold" (252). The wellbeing of these horses is sacrificed for the sake of a visual expression of newfound wealth, and in this respect they are only marginally less fortunate than those that have fallen victim to decadent modernity on the Dead Horse Trail. Upon their arrival in Dawson City, Peek, Lou and Ben bear witness to the

⁵ Interestingly, Ben's revelation comes after Peek's estranged father has been killed by an avalanche on Chilkoot Pass. Peek points out that Ben's father's accident is "Like the opposite of an avalanche" (214). Having provided an account of the destructive potential of nature in the sequence detailing the consequences of the avalanche (99-108), Kroetsch's antimodern sympathies ensure that he outweighs it with the even more horrible image of the death of Ben's father as a direct result of modern technology.

modernization of the boomtown, as they see boats “carrying iron bathtubs and big oak tables and satin sofas” (190). Lou points out “two crates of crystal chandeliers,” which not only exemplify conspicuous consumption, but also signal the visual bias that Kroetsch associates with urban culture (190).

Within the novel Kroetsch establishes a distinction between the miners of the Klondike Creeks, and the businesspeople of the boomtowns that have grown up to service their needs. Kroetsch’s miners are often people who have abandoned modernity, city dwellers who have chosen to turn away from “digging for gold” in the metaphorical sense in order to do so literally. Among the prospectors said to be “striking it rich” in the creeks are “a former tram driver from San Francisco,” “two ex-lawyers” and “a minister who had given up the cloth” (238). Even Lou is a former employee of a Seattle pawnshop. The prospectors are contrasted with the entrepreneurs who have come to the area. Lou rails against these representatives of urban modernity: “Those muck-a-mucks aren’t here to dig in the permafrost and mud. Not them. They’re here to rob us [...] Just you wait and see. Fancy clothing stores [...] Lawyer’s offices. Doctor’s offices. Beauty parlours and swanky hotels. They’ll be *mining* alright” (185). This division is upheld in the distinction between Ben Redd and Dan McGrew. Ben is an “integral” man who, as a cooper, is a skilled craftsman, whereas Dan is a saloon owner who prefers gambling to working. Ben believes that “Hard work never killed anybody,” while in marked contrast, “It was obvious that to Dan McGrew the very thought of work seemed like pretty severe punishment” (220). Upon their first encounter, Peek notes Dan’s stylish cowboy boots: “They were reddish-brown boots, decorated with enough white stitching to hold together my jeans. There wasn’t a trace of mud on those boots” (200). Throughout Kroetsch’s novels, mud imagery is associated with authenticity and organic unity. Those

characters who refuse to get their hands dirty are party to a debased modernity, living lives abstracted from the “real world” of mud, nature, and physical experience. Even the clothing worn by each man in their final encounter indicates the association made by Kroetsch between Dan and urban modernity, and between Ben and the natural integrity exemplified by dirt, an indicator of contact with the earth. Dan wears a bowler hat and “his favourite yellow vest” (290), while Ben’s “clothing [i]s more rags than clothing, from his ragged and dirty drill parka to his blackened mittens to his filthy woolen trousers to his long woolen socks and laced up high boots” (279).

Kroetsch’s privileging of the authenticity of “mud” over the artificial orderliness of urban modernity is epitomized in his treatment of Gussie Meadows, a former mistress of Dan McGrew who becomes Peek’s love interest. Gussie is connected to vegetation by her surname “Meadows,” and also by the way she dresses: in the bleak Yukon winter she wears a straw hat with “a corsage of roses fastened to the crown” (126). She dances in the mud, epitomizing Kroetsch’s celebration of contact between human beings and the soil of the earth: “When one of her shoes came off in the mud she took the other one off and finished the dance and then her partner sat her on someone’s lap and she lifted up her muddy, stockinged feet while something like ten stampedeers put her red shoes back on” (159-60). Peek notes that her dress is “caked with mud” (162), and he longs to “glide through that mud for two whole, uninterrupted minutes with Gussie Meadows in my arms” (157). As with Dorf’s experiences in the mud spa at Lapsi in *Alibi*, and McBride’s envelopment by mud in *Badlands*, direct contact with the earth itself exemplifies the return of a sense of organic union between humanity and nature. Gussie epitomizes the desirability of immersion in the earth itself, functioning as an earth goddess figure, and once again signalling Kroetsch’s romantic mythologizing of women as integral beings. Gussie’s

connection with the mud and vegetation marks her as belonging to the natural world that Kroetsch values above modernity. The gulf between these poles is signalled by the way that Dan is shown to misunderstand Gussie: he aims to bring her to the Klondike to dance in his saloon, telling her that “in Dawson City, if you dress like a dancer, then you’re a dancer” (139). Unlike Dan, Gussie believes that what is important about dancing is getting down into the mud, rather than caring about costumes: she chooses earthy authenticity over urban artifice.

Kroetsch connects modernity with a strong visual bias that leads to a tendency towards the “showy” and the “flashy,” like Dan’s pristine cowboy boots. The buildings in Dawson City have “false fronts” (189). Even Lou adopts artificial fashions when she goes to work in McGrew’s saloon, as Peek observes that “her dark hair was coiled under a spray of feathers. I mean, luminous feathers. Ostrich or something. You couldn’t really tell, they’d been dyed all sorts of colours” (241). Throughout the novel Kroetsch draws attention to the deceptive qualities of sight, and, therefore, the need for an overall sensory awareness. Like McLuhan, Kroetsch endorses the idea of synaesthesia, or sensory interplay, and connects a perceived decline in sensory wholeness with the visual bias that ensues with modernity and the machine age.

In the course of the novel Kroetsch highlights the importance of the senses of hearing, taste, smell, and touch, de-privileging the visual sense. In particular, Peek is associated with the sense of smell. During his time in the wilderness he smells the grizzly bear before he sees it (28). He describes the aroma of baked salmon as “a breakfast in itself” (33-4), and he extols the scent of freshly cut hemlock branches in his makeshift bed (37). Peek describes his arrival in Skagway primarily with reference to smell: “We could smell the wharves before we saw them. We couldn’t see them at

first, because of the falling snow [...] But we could smell the new lumber and the tarred ropes. And the dried apricots. I swear, dried apricots, I could smell them” (54). Significantly, it is when the travellers are deprived of their sight by a blizzard that their sense of smell comes to the foreground. Throughout the text Kroetsch indicates that deprivation of the sense of sight enables other senses, de-privileged in the modern era, to achieve importance once more. Peek’s sense of smell is synesthetically entwined with his sexual feelings. He describes his lover Gussie Meadows as smelling of “pure ambrosia,” and he associates her with the aroma of basil and cinnamon (140). Later, playing piano in the tourist bar that the Malamute Saloon has become, he smells the “raunchy” tourists: “You can feel it in the air. You can smell it. Like oakum mixed with cinnamon and honey” (306). Peek’s sense of smell distinguishes him from the modernizing culture of the gold rush, which Kroetsch clearly associates with a visual bias. Significantly, Kroetsch also connects a keen sense of smell with indigeneity, highlighting the ability of Native peoples to use smell to avoid the pitfall of placing too much trust in vision. Stranded in the wilderness, Peek, Lou and Ben encounter a group of four Tlingit men. Despite the fact that Ben’s kegs of whiskey are branded “salt herring”, their spokesman Isaac is not fooled as “It was obvious he could smell whiskey right through the staves and headings of Ben’s exquisitely made kegs” (50): “[Ben] had fooled a ship’s crew and seventy thirsty stampedeers. But he was having no luck whatsoever with those Tlingits” (51). In sharing a heightened awareness of smell with the Tlingits, Peek is demonstrably more “native” than the other prospectors. However, as Kroetsch associates smell with a pre-modern alternative to the visual culture of modernity, he maroons both Peek and the Tlingits within an idealized past time of sensory wholeness.

Throughout Kroetsch's novels he privileges the "audile-tactile," the sensory combination which McLuhan argues has atrophied in modern men and women due to the visual bias in post-Gutenberg culture. In *The Man from the Creeks* Kroetsch highlights the importance of the sense of touch. Peek and Gussie communicate through physical contact: "Gussie gave my hand a little squeeze. But it wasn't simply that. Sometimes a squeeze can be a question. Or even a bald statement" (138). Acts of touching (or failing to touch) prove to be crucial plot points. When Ben fails to shake Lou's hand after she announces her plan to take him away from the Klondike it is clear that this formerly "integral" man has been seduced by the obsessive desire for gold (274). Ben misinterprets a handshake between Lou and Dan (who are merely winning partners in a game of cards) as a sign that they have formed a sexual relationship (258). This contributes to the fatal misunderstanding that causes the deaths of all three: significantly, when Ben puts his faith solely in what he sees, instead of talking to Lou, his reaction causes this fatal outcome. On the night of the shootings itself, Ben misinterprets the sight of Lou and Dan "whispering together": what Ben reads as a shift in Lou's affections is in fact her assertion of her loyalty to Ben (291). Ultimately, Ben and Lou die in each other's arms, killed by a bullet from Dan's gun when she moves to shield him: "She and Ben were face to face. She was at once protecting him and holding him close" (300). Peek takes the core message of his story from this final gesture, making a simple invocation to value the tactile sense: "We must learn to hold each other" (307).

While Kroetsch foregrounds the danger of relying solely upon the visual sense, he also draws attention to moments when characters experience full sensory involvement. There are two main incidents where sensory interplay is foregrounded in the novel. In both of these, although the visual sense plays a small part, it is balanced

by a focus on alternative sensations. In the first incident, Peek has oral sex with Gussie Meadows. His sensations are expressed in terms of the tactile and the audile: “I liked the hard softness of her thighs, above her stockings. The almost bristly roughness of the first hairs. Gently with my fingers, I invited her close against my teeth. I thought I heard myself talking. Then I realized the voice I heard was Gussie’s own, and she was surely whispering to me”; “Gussie lifted against my sweating face her own wet touch, her caress, and her voice went out of any sound I had ever heard or felt, ever, in my whole life” (144). Peek is aroused by the sight of her stockings and garters, but these are not necessary for his pleasure, as his arousal continues when he is deprived of sight: “Sometimes all of a sudden she closed her thighs. She seized me into stillness. Held me. I might have died in a surfeit of sweet, wet fire and heavy perfume’ (147). Peek “embrace[s] the darkness”: “In the winter dark I found a dark of my own, by going under her flared and folded skirts. I liked the whispers of her pleasure, the touch of her fingers on my ears, her slightest moan when she used two hands to pull my head into her slow, hard motion” (146). His sensory integration highlights Peek’s status as the text’s integral man.

The other major incident of sensory interplay is the sequence where Ben enters the Malamute saloon and plays a tune on the piano that seems to tell his whole life story. This sequence is modelled closely on Service’s poem. In his recollections of this event, Peek veers between endorsing Service’s point of view and offering his own ‘corrective’ version.

Peek talks of the sensory effect of Ben’s piano playing: “he wasn’t just clutching at the piano keys. He got hold of all of us, and each of us, our skin and our bones. He got all the way in. And he started to claw and rip” (286). Although acting upon the ear, Ben’s music conjures up visual images and the sensation of smells: “Ben was in

his cooerage on the banks of the Mississippi, giving shape to an oak stave. It felt that way, listening to him. You could hear him pull a hollowing knife up the inside of a stave. You could smell the shavings. You could smell the cask being steamed” (287). Even the tactile sensations of sex are communicated by through Ben’s playing: “Ben Redd, I suppose you could say, was making love. It was the only way he really knew or had ever learned” (294).

Although at this point Ben is associated with the interplay of the audile-tactile senses, he eventually succumbs to the temptation of placing his trust wholly in his sight, and makes the misunderstanding that leads to the gunfight. In contrast with Ben, Dan McGrew is invariably associated with the visual sense. He positions the grand piano in the Malamute Saloon without regarding the room’s acoustics, in order to enable him to maintain the best possible view of his bar-room (206-7).

Significantly, when Dan befriends Ben he has been deprived of his sense of sight. Ben describes how they met when Dan was hiding in a large cask or “tun” in Ben’s cooerage on the Mississippi: “I tapped at a hoop on the tun. Something inside tapped back” [...] “‘Hello,’ I said. ‘It’s me,’ a voice said. From inside the tun. ‘What are you doing in there?’ I said. I guess that was kind of a stupid question. ‘I’m hiding,’ the voice said” (133-4). Dan is on the run following a gambling “misunderstanding” on a riverboat, and Ben saves his life by keeping him concealed and feeding him for three days (134). In his depiction of this incident, Kroetsch suggests that being deprived of vision forces Dan to talk to Ben, kindling a relationship between the two men in the process: “Ben Redd and Dan McGrew had never laid eyes on each other. That’s the funny part of it. They’d talked on and off for three days and well into three evenings, in a cooerage on the bank of the Mississippi River in Davenport, Iowa. They had whispered. They had let their silences do the talking, when they were in danger of

being overheard” (201). However, the written message that Dan leaves on the side of the cask that he was concealed within, (“Ben Redd, you’ll get your just reward” [144]), and his letter advising Ben to come to the Klondike (23), mark a return to the realm of the visual, a “fall” in terms of Kroetsch’s privileging of the audile-tactile senses. When he and Ben meet in Dawson, Dan speaks “in a tone that suggest[s] he [i]s trying to prime a pump rather than address a fellow human being” (219). Peek’s description associates Dan’s manner of talking with the operation of machinery rather than the audile-tactile authenticity associated with the craftsman Ben Redd.

Kroetsch emphasizes the false attractions of the visual sense by showing the negative consequences that result from his narrator’s capitulation to the visual bias associated with modernity. Early in the novel, Peek is at pains to dissociate his name from the act of looking, instead suggesting that it connects him with the natural landscape:

You might think I got my name from peeking. That wasn’t quite the case. My mother was no great speller, even though she got through grade eight before her parents sent her out to work. She thought she was naming me after Mount Baker, the peak that glowed white and beautiful up there in the sky above her childhood. [...] Anyway, somewhere in a government office she wrote down my name as Peek, and that was that. (59)

Like Ben, however, Peek ultimately lets his visual sense become dominant. He contributes to the gunfight at the Malamute Saloon, firing the first shot at one of the barrels of whiskey disguised as salt herring which is sitting on the piano: “I wanted to show people there was whiskey to be had for the asking. Good whiskey. Topnotch whiskey [...] I imagined a crowd of people rushing to pick up the keg and keep it from losing any more of its contents” (296). Peek’s desire to “show” what is in the

barrel, enacted via the mechanical technology of the gun, leads inevitably to the gunfight that kills Dan, Ben and his mother Lou. Through having the events of the novel culminate in this violent manner, Kroetsch emphasizes the mortal danger that arises from placing too much trust in the visual sense alone. Furthermore, as in *Alibi* and *The Puppeteer*, the substitution of the modern weapon of the gun for conversation indicates the negative impact of technology. Once again, in *The Man from the Creeks* Kroetsch suggests that humanity has lost its sensory integration, as modernization has damaged harmonious audile-tactile culture.

For Kroetsch, the gold rush is a transitional era, bridging an organically unified, pre-modern time and a period of modernization and mechanization. Some prospectors, such as Peek, leave the urban environment and learn to value the wilderness at precisely the moment when it comes under threat from the development that the gold rush enables. Ironically, therefore, the gold rush represents both the renunciation of modernity, and its ultimate triumph. Additionally, the desire to mine for gold is related to a wish to escape from an economy of “representative” paper money, an economy which Kroetsch aligns with urban modernity, but the search for it leads to the intrusion of this modernity into the Canadian natural environment. In *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* Walter Benn Michaels suggests that the fetishization of the perceived intrinsic value of gold as “real” or “primary” money signifies the desire for an “escape from a money economy” (148):

As money, of course, it replaces barter, but since its value as money is only a function of its value as a commodity, the exchange of any commodity for gold as money is identical to the exchange of that commodity for gold as commodity. All money exchanges, in other words, are also simultaneously barter exchanges, and the ‘intrinsic’ value that fits the precious metals to be

money guarantees at the same time that nothing ever really need be money (148).

Within the novel, gold is esteemed more highly than the paper money of the urban dilettantes who bring their financial resources to the Klondike in order to invest in the service industries, the “muck-a-mucks” who “brought their money with them when they came” (185). Mined through manual contact with the earth itself, gold is solid element with a tactile heft to it. At one point Lou tries to lift an ingot in the window of a bank, but cannot move it: “The brick didn’t budge” (193). It is interesting to compare the privileging of gold within Kroetsch’s text with McLuhan’s response to money, detailed in *Understanding Media*. McLuhan sees the move from “metallic to paper currencies” as paralleling the move from the audile-tactile tribal society to the fragmented, visually-biased society of the post-Gutenberg era (139). He directly associates printed money with the mechanical technology of the printing press, suggesting that “Money is an adjunct of that specialist alphabetic technology, raising even the Gutenberg form of mechanical repeatability to new intensity” (141). For McLuhan, money changes when it becomes print rather than gold: “Just as speech lost its magic with writing, and further with printing, when printed money supplanted gold the compelling aura of it disappeared” (131).

Within Kroetsch’s novel the gold rush in the Klondike enables the recovery of gold, with its “compelling aura,” from the abstraction of paper money, a technological innovation that separates humankind from the natural world. In *The Man from the Creeks*, Kroetsch’s imagery “naturalizes” gold, making it appear to be organic. One nugget is described as “staring [...] like a golden eye” (232).⁶ Ben discovers “a gold nugget about the size of a fist,” that Peek also likens to “a very small brain,” “A

⁶ This image also recalls another natural image, the “goldeye” fish caught by the cook Grizzly to feed the members of the Dawe expedition throughout the narrative of *Badlands*.

golden brain” which “glow[s] iridescent and alive” (280). Presented by Ben to Lou as “the token of his love,” this nugget achieves value in emotional, not monetary terms (300). Ultimately, Peek buries the nugget with his mother Lou: “I placed in her cupped hands the gold nugget given to her by Ben. It filled both her hands” (305). Returned to the earth, the nugget escapes the possibility of ever becoming part of a money economy, and thus, in a small way, modernization is halted.

For Kroetsch, the desire to escape from a “representative” money economy is a craving to escape from modernity itself, a longing to retrieve the primacy of a barter economy. Bartering is a form of economic activity which is valorized in antimodern thought, as it is perceived as evading the abstraction of “representative” money transactions. McLuhan suggests that “The extreme abstraction and detachment represented by our pricing system is quite unthinkable and unusable amidst populations for whom the exciting drama of price haggling occurs with every transaction” (137). Grosswiler draws attention to McLuhan’s belief that, “in contrast to the bartering system in oral cultures, literate societies have to fragment inner life through price mechanism in order to create price systems” (87). Throughout *The Man from the Creeks*, Ben, Lou and Peek engage in many acts of bartering. Most of the barrels of whiskey that Ben intends to smuggle to the Klondike to finance his venture with Dan do not make it to their destination, having been bartered along the way. Two kegs are exchanged for the release of Peek and Lou from the irate passengers on the *Delta Queen* (14), two more are given to the Tlingit men who transport Lou, Ben and Peek to Skagway (52), and one barrel goes to Lemon Ed for transporting them to the foot of the Chilkoot Trail (89). A keg is given to the trappers Loup and Boner who help them on their way via dog-sled, as these men refuse to be paid in cash, saying, “What would we buy with more money?” (116). Another keg goes to the boat-builder

Old Van Slyke as payment for three days work making their boat float (148), and three more are used to settle their debts with the hardware store proprietor Gussie Meadows (155-8).

It is particularly significant that each of these bartered transactions involves oral negotiation, moving the “sale” from an abstract and visual transaction into the valorized realm of audile-tactile sensory interplay. Furthermore, bartering is associated with indigenous culture. In Dawson City, Ben and Peek visit a trading post, where as well as customers paying in gold and cash, “Some Indian people were using marten and fox pelts, and bargaining in the process” (264). By having Peek, Lou and Ben participate in a barter economy, Kroetsch indicates his sympathy for an older, more “authentic” means of exchange that predates the invention of abstract, representative money in the print era. Notably, in this, Kroetsch’s most recent novel, there are echoes of his earliest published novel *But We Are Exiles*, in which Peter Guy turns the financial transaction of his donation of money to the Inuit man Lawrence Firth into an act of bartering.⁷ In Kroetsch’s construction of barter economies in his fiction, he privileges the “real” over the “representative,” aiming to bypass the economic systems that are associated with the fragmented world of modernity.

The Man from the Creeks adds an extra level of complexity surrounding the idea of barter as an escape from the “unnatural” economy of representative money, in that the most important item of exchange in the novel is gold itself. For example, Gussie Meadows achieves her success in Bennett City due to an act of bartering that also draws upon the idea of the “compelling aura” of gold raised by McLuhan:

She traded her gold jewellery for a hardware business that was going broke.

The man who owned it was lonesome for his wife back in Montreal. He was

⁷ Similarly, in *The Puppeteer*, the “integral man” Papa B manages to escape from the representative economy of money by recourse to the “reality” of barter, trading his puppet theatre to Bludgett in exchange for an airplane ticket to Europe (241).

having nightmares. His business was going to pot. He couldn't stand it any more, he was going crazy and charging the wrong prices and forgetting to collect for items purchased. He took Gussie's gold in exchange for the business, tent and stock and all, and melted the gold down to make it look like nuggets and headed for home. (128)

By purchasing the hardware store through an act of bartering, Gussie bypasses the paper economy. The shopkeeper clearly melts the gold jewellery in order to create the false impression that he has prospected for gold (and therefore experienced at first-hand the mythic frontier), but the anecdote also evokes the idea of returning gold to a more natural state. This incident represents Kroetsch's antimodernism in microcosm, in that it encompasses the recovery of the pre-modern ideal of bartering as an alternative to the money economy, and the reversal of modernization occurring in the transformation of jewellery into its elemental form. In a later incident in the novel, Kroetsch suggests that keeping gold in its "natural" state encapsulates non-participation in modernity. Following the gunfight at the Malamute Saloon, Peek inherits Ben's gold, but puts it to practical use rather than exchanging it for paper wealth: "The two moosehide bags of gold fell to me. I keep them right here in the cabin, on the kitchen table. They made great paperweights, at least until I could no longer lift the damned things" (301).

Ultimately, Peek comes to epitomize the ideal of the antimodern Canadian artist.⁸ Testing his body in the extreme conditions represented by his journey from Skagway to Dawson, Peek unwittingly participates in the *fin-de-siècle* "cult of the strenuous life" which comprises a significant element of antimodern thought (Lears

⁸ As Peek changes from an urban American into a Canadian at home in the northern wilderness, his narrative reiterates the cultural nationalism evident in Kroetsch's earlier distinction between the modernity and "technocracy" of the United States, and an antimodern Canada that values "the natural" and "the *uncreated*" ("The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition" (53-4).

118). In Canada, this “cult” permeates the discourse surrounding artists such as the Group of Seven, which as Lynda Jessup discusses, created “the fiction of the authentic Canadian painter as a premodern man seeking, in the imagined premodern environment of the Canadian wilderness, the physical and emotional intensity identified with authentic experience” (132). Jessup points out the various metaphors used to represent the “authenticity” of the Group of Seven emphasize their removal from modern civilization, both socially and developmentally: “The figure of the Canadian artist, derived from the artists’ sketching trips [...] was invariably described as that of a prospector, bushwhacker, woodsman, or child” (133). Significantly, each of these terms applies to Peek. Just fourteen years old at the beginning of the novel’s events, in the course of the narrative Peek explores the wilderness, befriends the Klondike trappers Loop and Ben who, realizing that he is their kindred spirit, tell him that he’s “here to stay” (120), and mines for gold. The heightened sensory awareness experienced by Peek also signals his integral wholeness, adding to the impression of “authenticity” generated by his account of the events of the gold rush. By creating a narrator who is “prospecter, bushwhacker, woodsman, [and] child,” Kroetsch associates his narrative with the signifiers of artistic authenticity noted by Jessup.

In having his narrator survive from the end of the nineteenth century to the closing years of the twentieth, Kroetsch makes it clear that Peek’s avoidance of the trappings of modernity is not merely a matter of temporality (due to having lived in a less modernized era), but is a conscious choice on his part. While clearly having the means to leave Dawson, Peek stays on, witnessing the city’s decline from boomtown to ghost town, and seeing the native plants begin to return his cabin and its yard to its wilderness state (217). Representing the possibility that urban development might

fail, Kroetsch's treatment of Dawson is his most recent fantasy of stalled modernization.

Chapter 8

Conclusion: Mr. Canadian Antimodern.

The preceding chapters of this thesis have provided textual evidence to support my argument that Robert Kroetsch's fiction contributes to a long-standing tradition of antimodernism. Antimodernism has been a notable strand of the artistic response to modernity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, appearing in Canadian culture, as well as in European and American cultures. What is significant about Kroetsch's antimodernism is that it has been positioned consistently as a form of postmodernism, not only through his own critical writings and interviews, but also in the works of other Canadian critics. Arguably the most influential of these, Linda Hutcheon opens the preface of her work *The Canadian Postmodern* with a quotation from Kroetsch's criticism, and concludes it with an entire chapter on his work, nominating him as "Mr. Canadian Postmodern" (160).

A brief discussion of Hutcheon's account of postmodernism will illuminate the ways in which her preoccupations colour her response to Canadian fiction since the nineteen-sixties. Hutcheon's insistence that postmodern art deliberately fights against the resolution of disparate elements into unity, and aims to maintain rather than resolve "paradoxes" into singular meanings, ensures that the central theses of *The Canadian Postmodern* are belied by the texts which she analyses. Many of the writers whom she discusses, including Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood and Kroetsch, clearly privilege the McLuhanesque ideals of organic sensory unity in the very examples that Hutcheon discusses in her text.

Realizing that many of the writers that she discusses began to produce their "postmodern" work in the nineteen-sixties, Hutcheon remarks that "those years also

come under severe attack from postmodernism, which always contests as well as exploits the values that gave it birth. In the sixties the buzz-word of culture was (paradoxically) the 'natural,' the authentic [...] What postmodernism has done is show how the 'natural' is in fact the 'constructed,' the made, the social" (12).

Hutcheon is correct to a certain extent, in that some postmodern texts indeed emphasize that certain phenomena previously thought of as "natural," such as racial hierarchies, the desire for technological progress and colonial expansion, and the maintenance of unequal gender roles, are actually socially constructed. But if "nature" is taken to mean the natural world, meaning the non-urban environments of the wilderness or even the rural landscape (which, as Bantjes points out in "Modernism and the Machine Farmer," can in fact be read in "cultural" terms as a site of modernity in western Canada), certain problems with Hutcheon's construction of postmodernism rapidly become apparent. Within many of the texts that Hutcheon discusses, "nature" as the natural world continues to be a valorized term, acting as the authentic alternative to the "artificial" culture of modernity.

Hutcheon's assertion that the work of postmodern Canadian authors "offers no final answers; indeed, it is suspicious of the very notion of final answers" (x) is contradicted by the insistence upon the desirability of antimodern ways of life, as opposed to active participation in modernity, evident in many of the novels that she chooses to analyse. The authors of these texts do not hesitate to express attitudes abhorring what they perceive as the inauthenticity of modern existence. For example, Hutcheon's insistence upon postmodern ambivalence is not supported by her reading of *Surfacing*, as her analysis indicates that Atwood's novel concludes with an unequivocal renunciation of modernity. Hutcheon remarks that the technological bias of the heroine's father, as reflected in his "attempt to photograph – to fix life – has

ironically led to death (physical and spiritual) and to defeat by the forces of nature” (144-5). She also highlights the significance of the wilderness in the novel as an environment where the narrator achieves the organic wholeness of being that is symbolized by pregnancy: “To immerse oneself in nature is also, Atwood suggests, to accept the natural within [...] Now the protagonist-artist can opt for the creation of life, but only after she has learned the lessons of natural process” (144-5). Again, in her reading of *Life Before Man*, Hutcheon’s analysis indicates that Atwood offers an unequivocal critique of modernity within this text. She points out that Atwood’s central character Lesje, a palaeontologist, initially uses “the labelling, the controlling, rational ordering of science” in order “to create a world she can control”, but ultimately her pregnancy allows “the unknown, natural order [to] assert itself” (149): “thanks to Lesje’s ‘sea-change,’ the artificial and the dead can be connected once again to the natural and the living” (150). Even as described within Hutcheon’s own criticism it is clear that, in their privileging of nature, these novels offer the “final answers” that she has claimed are abjured in Canadian postmodern texts.

Repeatedly, if unintentionally, Hutcheon draws attention to the way in which Canadian postmodern writers privilege the “natural” (often represented by the body) over a “culture” equated with the ordering processes of modernity. In her response to Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*, she recounts various descriptions of bodily functions and sexual acts in the novel, concluding that “Cohen, like Rabelais before him, refuses [...] a separation of art from the realities of bodily life” (31). Once again, her interpretation is derived from an unarticulated antimodernism that is conflated with postmodernism. For Hutcheon, “Cohen’s technological postmodern humanity is, like Rabelais’s medieval equivalent, faced with a serious, even fear-inspiring universe,” as his central characters are “ironic victims of their own and social ‘progress.’ Cities

have overtaken the wilderness; plastic has replaced birchbark on canoes; movie stars have become modern saints in celluloid heaven” (32). By drawing parallels between the twentieth century and the middle ages, Hutcheon echoes McLuhan’s and Kroetsch’s antimodern valorization of the works of Rabelais. Each of these twentieth-century Canadian critics suggests that Rabelais’s works are exemplary writings that participate in an organically whole, earthy, audile-tactile pre-modern realm, counteracting the fragmentation and segmentation typically associated modernization and print culture.

As discussed in my chapter on *When Sick for Home*, from the earliest period in his writing career, Kroetsch seeks to evoke in writing the sensory wholeness signalled by a focus on earthy tactility. In his later criticism he associates this tendency with Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque. Neil Randall has explored in greater depth the Rabelaisian focus on bodily functions in Kroetsch’s fiction, but Hutcheon herself indicates that in Kroetsch’s *Alibi* the protagonist Dorf “*must* be led from his initial vision of life,” in which he is disgusted by his body and its excretions, “to an acceptance of the body and its desires as also good and natural” (180-1, emphasis added). Both this novel and Hutcheon’s reading of it foreground the existence of a significant antimodern theme in Kroetsch’s work: the body – the locus of sensory interplay – must be seen as “good and natural” for Dorf to achieve the organic wholeness of being denied to him during his urban existence. Hutcheon is determined to find ambivalence and equivocation where there is none in order to make Kroetsch fit into her construction of a Canadian postmodernism in which the “constant paradoxical combating of the inevitability of closure” is an essential feature (160).

Many of the texts discussed by Hutcheon manifest an intense focus on orality –often associated with pre-modern “authenticity” – as a mode of discourse that

provides a positive alternative to the “modern” printed word. Again, this leads to contradictions in her work, as she insists that Canadian writers of postmodern novels, or “metafictionists,” “are not guilty of what Derrida might see as a resurrecting of the myth of the authenticity of the spoken word,” even when they are “looking, often desperately, to auditory models” (58). This position has been attacked by Diane Tiefensee, who has dedicated a monograph to exploding the myth that Kroetsch’s fiction and criticism (and Canadian postmodern criticism as a whole) conforms to Derridean standards.¹ By continually emphasizing Kroetsch’s privileging of oral speech over the written word, Tiefensee makes the case that he reaffirms a “metaphysics of Presence” (13), and therefore that his message is the phonocentric converse of that of Derrida. The debate about whether Canadian postmodern literature and criticism can be rightly described as Derridean leads to an important question. Why do Canadian critics, including Tiefensee, Hutcheon and Kroetsch, look to Derrida as the source of cultural authority when the theories of their compatriot Marshall McLuhan are much more convincingly applicable to Kroetsch’s texts and to many of the other works comprising “the Canadian postmodern”?

The continued existence of a metaphysics of presence in contemporary Canadian literature, as demonstrated by the persistence of phonocentrism, is related to the antimodern tendency within Canada’s cultural elite. McLuhan’s emphasis on orality is derived from his desire for Western humanity to retrieve the audile-tactile modes of existence which he feels have been lost due to technological innovations and modernization. In McLuhan’s work, the printing press epitomizes the ways in which new technologies can impact negatively on the holistic sensory harmony of

¹ Kroetsch explicitly acknowledges his attraction to Derrida’s work in *Labyrinths of Voice* (42), and throughout his criticism and interviews he utilizes Derridean terminology, including such terms as deconstruction, *différance* and trace. See for example his references to deconstruction in Hancock (39) and Kroetsch and Bessai (209), his discussion of “trace” in “The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues” (2), and his use of the term “under erasure” in “For Play and Entrance” (118).

pre-modern life: “For McLuhan, continuity, homogeneity, mechanization and fragmentation are all aspects of print culture” (Grosswiler 168). By de-privileging McLuhan and instead asserting the importance of Derrida, Canadian critics veil the antimodern search for authenticity that underpins much Canadian postmodern writing. Significantly, the references to European poststructuralists made by Kroetsch do nothing to dispel the idea that the sophistication of North American writing is of autochthonous origin: the “deconstructionists” whom Kroetsch praises in *Labyrinths of Voice* include William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens (31). In effect, Kroetsch uses the vocabulary of poststructuralism to legitimate features which he suggests are already part of a parthenogenetic North American postmodern literary culture.

The distinction between print and oral culture plays a vital role in Hutcheon’s construction of Canadian postmodernism. It is particularly significant that the English Canadian writers studied in her text are predominantly concerned with interrogating the idea of written history, as her paradigmatic form of postmodernism, “historiographic metafiction,” indicates. These writers, like Kroetsch, emphasize the importance of recovering oral sources that contradict the printed record or conventional history. They aim to provide alternative accounts of documented historical events, constructing narratives that are more fleshed-out, and therefore have a more “authentic” appearance than historical documents or conventional histories. In several of his novels (including *The Studhorse Man*, *Badlands* and *The Man from the Creeks*) Kroetsch critiques narratives of past events as presented in written documents in order to draw attention to the importance of finding oral sources. In doing so, he affirms the idea that paying due attention to orality can bring organic wholeness to the fragmented, artificially ordered narratives of conventional written histories.

Predisposed to read his novels as exemplifying the supposed postmodern qualities of “discontinuity and indeterminacy” (Kaye and Thacker 167), critics such as Hutcheon often overlook Kroetsch’s emphasis on the importance of assembling a more complete version of events. Sherrill E. Grace, on the other hand, points out that in *Badlands* Anna Dawe travels west in order to “break free from the *incomplete, hence false, past* and the restricting conventions dictated by [her father William Dawe’s] story and his field notes” (“Wastelands and Badlands” 26, emphasis added).

Besides Linda Hutcheon, various other critics have cemented the importance of history in contemporary Canadian fiction, most notably Martin Kuester in *Framing Truths* (1992), Bernd Engler and Kurt Müller in their edited collection *Historiographic Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature* (1994) and, more recently, Herb Wyile in *Speculative Fictions* (2002), and Coral Ann Howells and her fellow contributors in *Where Are the Voices Coming From?* (2004). In her preface to this volume, Howells highlights the reasons for the persistent recourse to history in contemporary Canadian literature, suggesting that Canadian novelists and filmmakers “take up the challenge of telling stories of deliberately marginalized or silenced figures whose ‘little narratives’ resist containment by the metanarratives of history” (xvii). Likewise, Wyile remarks that in contemporary Canadian literature, “Writers of fiction, like their counterparts in the discipline of history, have increasingly occupied themselves with finding and telling the stories of those left out of traditional history” (5), because “In questioning and/or questing beyond received history in Canada, these writers raise important concerns about the cultural, racial, gender, class, and colonial biases of that history” (7). The general critical consensus on Canadian historiographic metafiction offered by these scholars is that it operates to contest concepts of “received” history by offering alternative

perspectives. According to this logic, authors of historiographic metafiction aim to construct a unified, organically whole narrative by weaving together various strands told from different perspectives, and in particular by including “oral” materials which contest the accuracy of print records. Significantly, Wylie praises writers who approach Canadian history in “carnavalesque ways” (15); as I have previously discussed, both Kroetsch and McLuhan associate the carnivalesque with completeness, as it enables the organic wholeness of sensory interplay to re-enter a print-oriented world associated with fragmentation and linear sequence.

The crucial point is that, in a very common form of contemporary Canadian literature, printed accounts of historical events become paradigms for the perceived negative impact of modernity: its reduction of the organic fullness of the real world into the segmented and fragmented written narrative. Wylie remarks that the writers that he studies “convey that the past matters, that it has material significance and does not simply amount to a disembodied, textual, referent-less archive, an anti-materialist perspective that we adopt at our peril” (264). In other words, contemporary Canadian writers aim to displace the notion of the “disembodied” text by insisting upon the possibility of referentiality, or of evoking the presence of the “real,” thus restoring a sense of organic unity to a culture suffering the consequences of the fragmentation inherent to the print era. As such, these writers participate in the tradition of Canadian antimodernism.

Jessup, McKay, Moray and Edwardson have made important points about the project of critiquing modernity evident in early twentieth century Canadian art. Their work has highlighted the existence of an antimodern tradition in Canadian culture, which I argue continues into the present day, as exemplified by Robert Kroetsch’s fiction. However, Kroetsch is just one of many contemporary English Canadian

novelists whose desire to achieve a sense of organic unity is evident in the aspiration to “flesh out” print records of the past, and the desire to construct texts that offer more complete narratives, presenting a fuller account. These writers emphasize the importance of orality, suggesting that multiple perspectives can challenge the illusory singularity of conventional historical accounts, which are demonstrated to be dependent on the fragmentation that McLuhan associates with segmentation and ordering impulses predominant in the print era.

Antimodern artists and writers idealize certain aspects of life associated with the past, embracing “a desire for the type of ‘authentic,’ immediate experience supposedly embodied in pre-industrial societies – in medieval communities or ‘Oriental’ cultures, in the Primitive, the Traditional, or the Folk” (Jessup 4). Atwood has remarked that “By taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves” (*In Search of Alias Grace* 27). In this light, the significance of the preoccupation with the past in recent Canadian fiction becomes evident. Looking backwards, as McLuhan does in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, enables the contemporary Canadian writer to see the price paid for modernization: the loss of a holistic relationship between human beings and their world. The texts valorized as postmodern novels by Hutcheon in *The Canadian Postmodern* and by Kroetsch in “Disunity as Unity” demonstrate the dual (and interrelated) preoccupations of their authors with the retrieval of a more complete vision of the past than exists in traditional histories and the print record, and the necessity of immersion in the rural or wilderness landscape as a means to achieve the sensory wholeness lost to humanity as a result of modernization.

Kroetsch’s texts offer a deeply antimodern worldview. In *When Sick for Home* Martin Lockner achieves sensory harmony through artisanal labour on a farm. *But We Are Exiles* sees Peter Guy exchanging his life as a “college man” (101) in the

modernized east for a wilderness existence, and encapsulates the desire to experience indigeneity as exemplified in Peter's respect for the Native pilot Jonas Bird and the Inuit trapper Lawrence Firth: a pattern that is almost exactly repeated in *Gone Indian*, in which Jeremy Sadness achieves a sense of indigeneity through his experiences in the northern landscape and his encounters with the Native Beaver family. In *The Words of My Roaring*, Johnnie Backstrom rejects the new technology of the radio in favour of the antimodern ideal of a rural "'organic' community of face-to-face relationships" (Lears 64). *The Studhorse Man* epitomizes Kroetsch's mourning of the transition "from a horse economy to a mechanical world" ("A Conversation with Margaret Laurence" 56). In the same text, by contrasting the fragmentariness of Demeter Proudfoot's "factual" notecards with the fullness of Hazard Lepage's oral account of his adventures, Kroetsch anticipates his similar project in *Badlands*, in which the richer version of events that Anna Dawe learns from the Native Anna Yellowbird allows her to discard the fragmentary field notes intended by her father to stand as the singular account of events. In *What the Crow Said* the fragmented "Gutenberg Man" Gus Liebhaber achieves sensory wholeness when he abandons his printing press for the bed of Tiddy Lang, joining with her to form "the naked circle of everything" (193). *Alibi* and *The Puppeteer* chart William Dorf's transition from being a divided, permanently jet-lagged epitome of modernity to becoming "muddily human" once more, through immersion in the earth and the wilderness in *Alibi*, and through participating in the pre-modern ideals of monastic life and folk art in *The Puppeteer*. In *The Man from the Creeks*, Kroetsch presents his narrator Peek – who has turned away from the urban modernity of his Seattle childhood – in terms that evoke the encomiums accorded to the Group of Seven as the archetypal Canadian antimodern artists, "prospector, bushwhacker, woodsman, [and] child" (Jessup 133).

What does it mean to read Kroetsch's novels, and Canadian "postmodern" fiction more generally, as "antimodern"? To do so is to emphasize that late twentieth century Canadian literature was not created in a vacuum. The "Canadian antimodern" is part of the tradition of artistic critique of modernity; a tradition has been a substantial presence in western culture since the late eighteenth century, when many artists and writers began to question the merits of modernization. In Britain, Romanticism influenced the Arts and Crafts movement, which in turn inspired significant antimodern strands of artistic modernism in Europe,² as well as the idealization of artisanal life in the United States.³ Currents of such modernist antimodernism were manifested in early twentieth century Canadian art, such as works of the Algonquin School and the Group of Seven, the arts and crafts revivals in Quebec and Nova Scotia, and the primitivism of Emily Carr. Similarly, in literature of this period, the novels of the prairie writers F.P. Grove and Martha Ostenso indicated their "rebellion against technology and the homogenisation of post-WWI North American society," and their idealization of "Rural life and pioneering [as] an antidote to the machine age" (Kaye and Thacker 178). In the inter-war period the Banff Institute was founded as a cultural institution with the dual purpose of propagating knowledge of European artistic modernism (in which, as I have noted, antimodernism has always been an important current) and preserving the "folk" oral culture of rural Alberta.⁴

Kroetsch's writings emerge out of this cultural history of antimodernism, as do many of the English Canadian novels collectively termed "the Canadian

² For example, the influence of the British Arts and Crafts movement on Belgian art nouveau is explored in Amy Ogata's "Artisans and Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siecle Belgium: Primitivism and Nostalgia," while the impact of the works of John Ruskin and William Morris on the earliest incarnation of the Bauhaus has been highlighted by Frank Whitford (23).

³ For discussion of the American arts and crafts movement in relation to antimodernism, see Lears (59-96).

⁴ Frances W. Kaye provides a detailed history of the Banff Centre in *Hiding the Audience* (55-91).

Postmodern.” To read these works as antimodern is to locate Canadian literature within international modernism, and to deny the myth of parthenogenesis that has underpinned the cultural nationalist discourse prevalent in discussions of Canadian postmodernism. It is to acknowledge that antimodernism is not divorced from modernism, as the critique of modernity has been a vital element in many modernist cultural movements and their romantic predecessors since the late eighteenth century. It is to accept that even the futurology of McLuhan has at its core the desire to recapture a sense of organic unity believed to have been destroyed by modernization. Above all, to accept the contemporary existence of Canadian antimodernism is to begin to question the effects of both the turn away from modern life in much recent English Canadian fiction, and the continuing elision of urban existence in favour of representations of the idealized authenticity of the rural, the pastoral and the wilderness.

In his discussion of radical urban poetics in recent Alberta writing, Derek Beaulieu attacks the emphasis on the rural environment in twentieth-century prairie literature, suggesting that for writers in twenty-first century Calgary “the defining node is no longer geography and writing the landscape.” Instead, “these Calgary poets emphasize left-wing social politics [...] and an inner-city urban environment as compositional and theoretical frameworks for poetic discourse” (n. pag). I argue that disdain for the urban environment is not exclusively a prairie issue, but is a feature of English Canadian writing in general. Elsewhere, Rinaldo Walcott has praised Trinidadian Canadian Dionne Brand for “moving beyond the discourse and literary tropes of ‘roughing it in the bush’ and ‘survival’ in a barren landscape” (284) by incorporating “the urban spaces of migrant existence” into her work (279). Both Beaulieu and Walcott highlight the class and racial implications of the dominant

literary tropes of the wilderness and the rural landscape in English Canadian literature. Recently, there has been a move in Canadian literary studies towards discussions of the representation of urban space in Canadian writing as an attempt to redress the continuing bias towards wilderness and rural environments in the literature of a nation where, in 2001, 80% of the population was urban.⁵ Accepting the continuing existence of Canadian antimodernism enables the cultural implications of the landscape images which recur in contemporary Canadian literature to be unveiled, environmental motifs which, although seemingly neutral, in fact encode a specific form of class- and racially-based “natural” associations between geography and authenticity. Examining contemporary Canadian literature in terms of antimodernism avoids the illusory break with tradition signalled by the temporal indicator “post,” and foregrounds the cultural nationalism lying behind the mythology of an autochthonous national literature.

⁵ This statistic is from census data available from Statistics Canada, “Population Urban and Rural, by Province and Territory,” <<http://www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/demo62a.htm>>. For recent contributions to the re-imagining of Canada as a predominantly urban nation in literature, see Edwards and Ivison’s 2005 collection *Downtown Canada*.

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